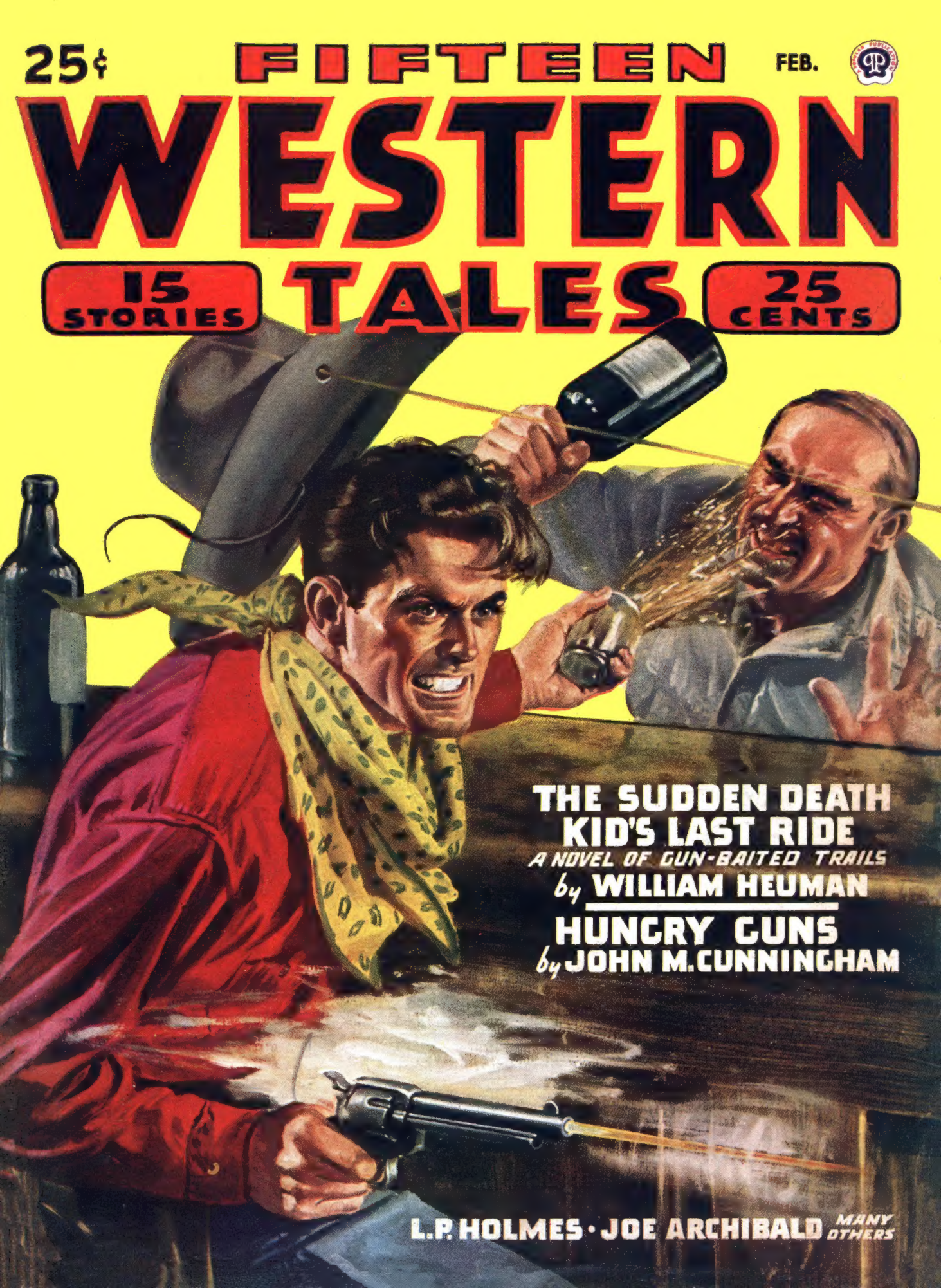
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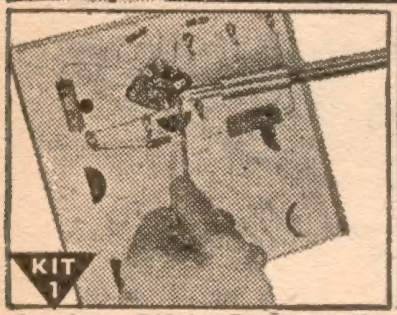

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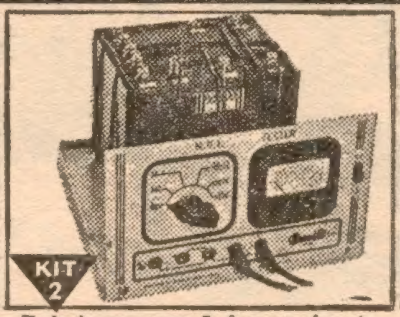

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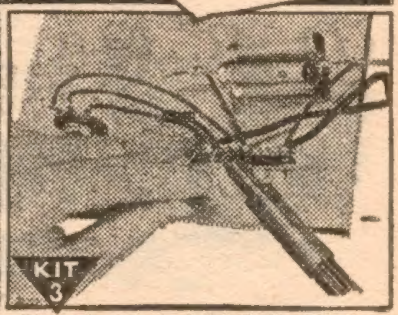

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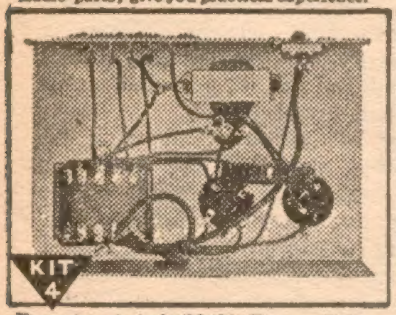

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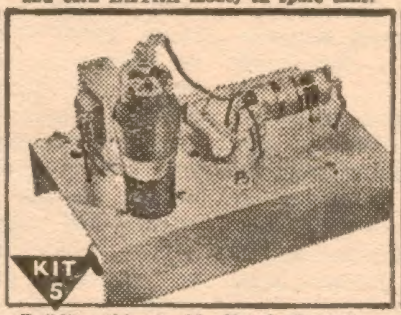

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• ON THE TRAIL •

"FROM Fort Kearney West, he was feared a great deal more than the Almighty." Into that compact sentence an early biographer packed a thumbnail sketch of the terrible Slade.

J. A. Slade was born in Illinois to quiet, respectable parents. At 26 he disturbed the even tenor of their lives by killing another man over a quarrel. Finding a change in address advisable, he signed as train-master aboard one of the early immigrant trains bound for California out of St. Joseph, Missouri. Slade's hot temper soon embroiled him in a quarrel with the wagon driver, a man who proved quicker on the draw than the young killer. Confronted with two cocked pistols, Slade turned to persuasive logic. It was a pity, he argued, to waste life over so small a matter. Why not settle it like men, with bare fists? The wagon driver agreed and threw away his pistols whereupon Slade drew his own gun, laughed pleasantly at the driver's evident simplicity, and shot that gentleman through the head.

His reputation for desperate courage won him the post of division-agent on the Overland Express at Julesburg, a nest of horse thiefs and killers. When he took command the express was almost paralyzed by outlaws who stole the company's horses, ransacked their coaches, and laughed at the idea that anyone would be so foolhardy as to protest such proceedings. Slade protested promptly and pointedly by shooting four—some say six—of the outlaws on sight, while carrying on another, private feud with the man whom he replaced as station agent—one Jules.

In due time Slade was transferred to the Rocky Ridge division, a dubious promotion, as that post had become the principal stronghold of general violence along the express route. Here he raised his personal killings to an impressive twenty-six. In between official business he sandwiched his old personal score. Slade's gunmen had found Jules.

Slade inspected his victim, made sure he was securely bound, then left the shivering wretch in the cattle-yard all night while he dawdled over the luxury of killing him. The next morning he propped Jules against a post for target practice, nipping the flesh here and there and sniping off an occasional finger with well-placed slugs. When he finally finished Jules, Slade reverted to an earlier practice, cutting off his victim's ears.

After conquering the outlaws of Rocky Ridge, Slade took a post in Montana. Here he met a new kind of danger. A vigilante committee, having just disposed of the organized bandits, was not disposed to tolerate Slade's turbulent and very personal version of law and order in its place, and six hundred miners insisted on a hanging.

Curiously enough, he commanded a fierce loyalty even in defeat, and one of his henchmen, standing beside the gallows, whipped off his coat and declared that the vigilantes would have to shoot him before they executed his chief.

This worthy, however, prudently reconsidered when 100 rifles were instantly leveled at his head. For his final defense Slade had to turn to the eloquence which saved his life when the wagon driver beat him to the draw many years before. This time his speech was never finished. The box jerked under his booted feet and the express boss died, like a good many others, "for lack of breath."

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HUNGRY GUNS

CHAPTER ONE

The Devil Plays a Harp

"DRAW your guns and keep them ready," Bohannon said. They rode on, their horses straining and stumbling up the steep track. For the fiftieth time he felt behind him for the saddle bags, stuffed full of bills, to reassure himself that they were still there.

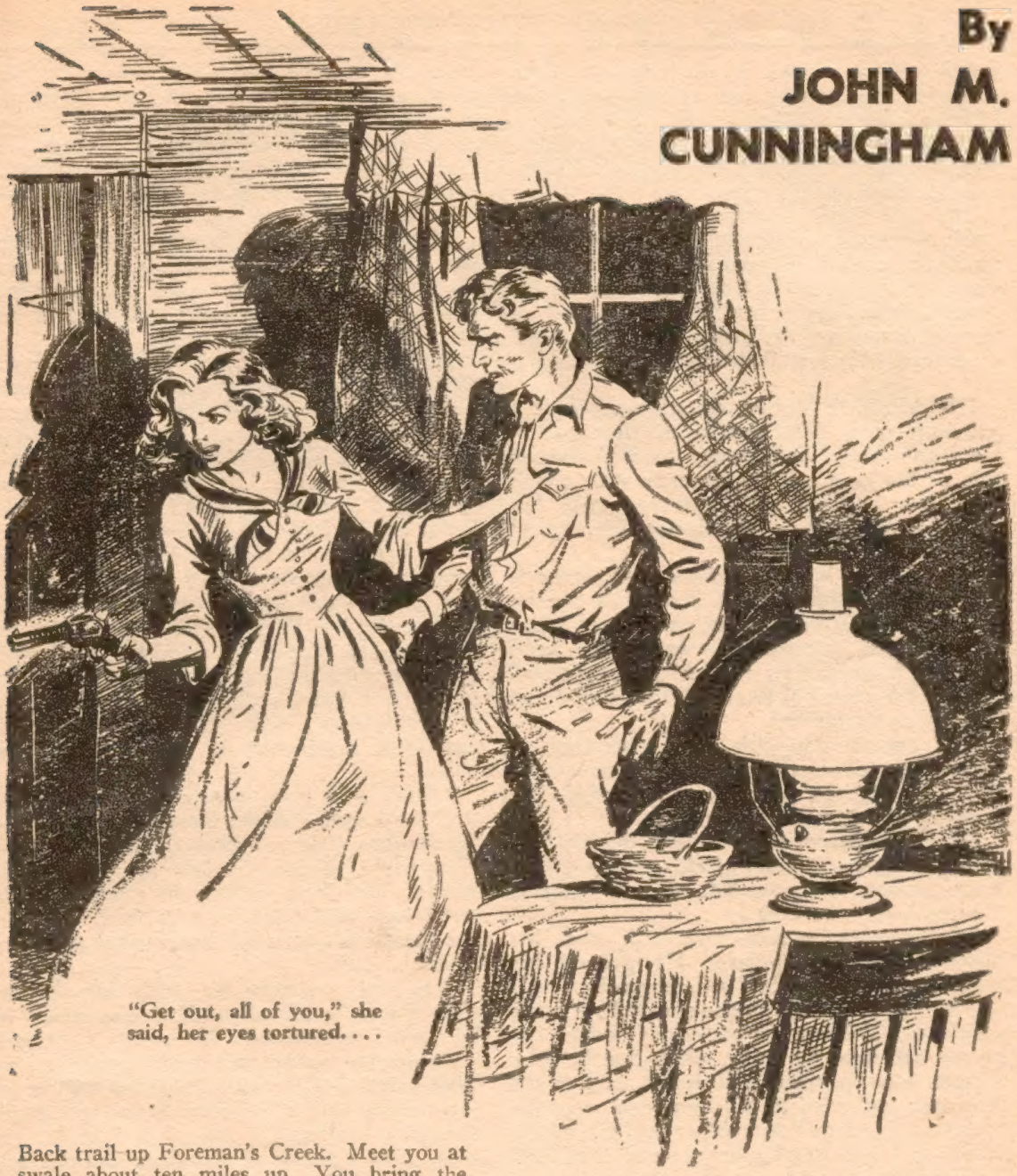
The trail suddenly leveled off and widened into a small boulder-strewn glade between the steep black hulks of the mountains on each side. Ahead, the track rose again toward the distant kings of the Sierras.

Bohannon pulled up his horse and let him blow. The advance guard looked at the map.

"This it?" he asked in a low voice.

Bohannon read the message from Robinson again without answering. It was cryptic, and made some hidden point.

By
JOHN M.
CUNNINGHAM



"Get out, all of you," she said, her eyes tortured. . . .

Back trail up Foreman's Creek. Meet you at swale about ten miles up. You bring the money. Keep this secret and watch yourself. You'll know my coming by a jew's harp. . . .

"Must be," the rear guard said. "The main camp's only about half a mile on."

"This sure would be a hell of a place to get ambushed in," the advance guard said.

"Quit worrying," Bohannon said. "Nobody but Robinson knows about us coming."

"Yeah? And just how much do you know about Robinson?"

"Keep quiet." A horse nickered up the trail.

Bohannon held his breath. The coarse pluck and twang of a jew's harp came down the trail and he relaxed. The guard sighed

In Hangman's Gulch the Devil, not the angels, played a harp—and Bohannon found himself strangely unwilling to dance to its tune—at the end of a rope!

and Bohannon smiled. It was over—the long struggle, the worry, the secrecy—and the Liberty Mine was his.

The twanging was closer now *Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine* . . . It broke off short.

The last thing Bohannon heard was the crash of gunfire before and behind, the hoarse scream of one of the guards and the shout in his own throat; the last thing he saw, in the gloom of the canyon, was the white burst of muzzle-blast from the rocks beside the trail. Then everything exploded into darkness.

HE AWOKE slowly, conscious only of a grinding pain that seemed at first to fill his whole body, and slowly focused in one side of his head, filling his ears with a dull roar. He groaned and tried to move, felt the rasp of gravel on his cheeks. He opened his eyes.

The canyon lay in semidarkness under a bright, cold moon, the firs and pines casting a deep gloom over the jumble of skull-white boulders that cluttered the wash. His head cleared a little and he realized that the roaring was the sound of the creek tumbling down the canyon to his left.

The guards lay with arms and legs in grotesque sprawls that needed no interpretation. The horses were gone. Blaisdell had been right; he was a fool.

He remembered the warning he had received in Reno. *Stay out of Hangman's Gulch. Your money ain't wanted, nor you either. You can't buy the Liberty. . . .*

The horses were gone and, with them, his hundred thousand dollars. He ground his teeth in a misery of self-reproach. He'd walked right into it. The one person he'd never suspected, Robinson, had simply taken the money and kept the mine. Why had he ever trusted him—a man he'd never even met? Robinson had tried to kill him—and when he found out he hadn't succeeded, he'd try again. *Better get out,* something warned him, *and get out fast.*

He groaned and let his head fall back to the gravel. *Hurry up, hurry up,* a voice whispered in his inner ear, the same voice that had been prodding him on these last two months, prodding him three thousand miles across the country to the mines. *You've only got two days left to settle with Blaisdell. Hurry up before it's too late—get that money back. You know who did it—hurry up. And then get out. . . .*

He struggled up among the stones, the full force of his loss hitting him its first impact. He was sunk, and worse than that, he'd failed his father and the people who'd trusted him. The money they'd scraped together, to try to save the bank back in Richmond, the money from his family's home—the savings of depositors—how many men, big and little, had he taken down with him this night? And worst of all, the twenty-five thousand he'd borrowed from Blaisdell, that he had to pay back, or secure with the deed to the mine, in two days, was gone too.

Next he thought of Martha. What chance would he have now, ruined, of getting her? How could he go back, worse than a failure, and expect to be accepted by her and her family?

He found himself trembling with anger. *Stay out of Hangman's Gulch* . . . How many were there against him? And who? It wasn't only Robinson—there was somebody else, too. He clenched his teeth and struggled to his feet, stood swaying. Despair rose again, and he fought it down savagely. Stay out, hell! What did he have left to lose?

He looked down with contempt at his once-neat, well-cut Eastern frock coat and britches, torn in one knee and covered with dust. His tall beaver lay by the trail, crushed by his fall, one side ripped by a bullet. He'd come out here spick and span, as though he were going on a Sunday picnic, full of confidence, and gullible as a baby. He picked up the hat and stood looking at it. Blaisdell had been right.

"Don't take your money up in that country," he'd said. *"Make Robinson come down for it, even if he is scared to leave his mine. Hangman's Gulch is full of thieves—the miners have been robbed so much half the works are shut down. You're fresh out from the East, and you don't know what you're up against. . . ."*

And now two men lay dead, and only by chance was he left alive. Two men killed by his own foolhardiness. He couldn't go back.

He started up the trail and stopped, hearing what sounded like an explosion up the canyon—a muffled thump, followed by a sigh of air, and then another. It seemer to him that he could hear a sound of shouting, like the roar of a mob, but it was too confused with the noise of the creek for him to be sure.

HE LOOKED at his clothes again. If they knew he wasn't dead, they'd be on the watch for him, both Robinson and the other bunch. He sailed the hat off among the rocks and wiped the blood off his face and neck. He was tender no more. If this was the wild West they talked about back East, he'd match it, or get killed trying.

He stripped one of the guards and changed into the other's clothes, then carefully dressed the corpse in his own. If they thought he was merely one of the hired guards, they wouldn't pay much attention to him.

He put on the guard's gunbelt, put his own pistols in the holsters, and went through his papers. All of them he left on the body, except the list of the numbers of the bills which Blaisdell had given him.

He started up the trail. Something silvery glinted in the moonlight. He picked it up. At first he thought it was a tiny silver horseshoe, and then he saw that it was a jew's harp, hand made, covered with peculiar designs.

He looked up, his face sharp with thought. If Robinson had dropped it, it was proof against him. He slipped it into his pocket and, setting his teeth against the jarring pain in his head, began the climb through the moon-spotted gloom of the canyon.

As the trail rose, the creek fell away into a deepening gorge. He stopped, panting, and wiped the sweat from his forehead and out of his eyes. Looking up, he noticed a reddish glow in the tops of the highest trees ahead of him—the reflection of distant firelight. Now he was certain he heard the deep roar of a mob.

He began the ascent again, swiftly, and suddenly came to the top, a sort of rim about what must once have been a lake, now drained as the creek had cut down through the natural dam. Before him lay the mining camp of Hangman's Gulch, a collection of five or six log buildings facing each other around a large square, their rough façades distinct in the red blaze of two immense bonfires. The square was thronged with men, all facing away from him, toward the largest building, listening to a speaker who stood on the porch. The front of the building bore a huge and gaudily painted sign: HASKILL'S BULLION BAR AND DANCE.

The main road dropped into the camp from the low south ridge, cutting between disorderly rows of tents and shacks which stretched up the valley to the dark pine forest beyond. His teeth began to chatter as he stood and his sweat-soaked shirt turned clammy. He headed for the crowd.

Beyond the first fire he made out the grim shape of a gallows, brand-new, standing in the middle of the crowd. He stopped behind the rear rank and, as he listened to the speaker, realized that the purpose of the meeting was to form a vigilante committee, and to find somebody to hang on the gallows.

The speaker, a heavy-set giant, ended his harangue with a rising bellow. "After we've wrangled up the committee I want to hear every detail of every crime that's happened in the Gulch. It's somebody among us, no outsider. Now we want twenty good men. I'll start off. If you want 'em, holler—if you don't, shut up. Blackjack Thorpe!"

A roar went up from the crowd and a man mounted the porch and stood behind the speaker. Bohannon began edging hurriedly around the crowd, making for the porch.

"Pig Hummel! Jake Spence!" Both men were shouted into office and mounted the porch. As Bohannon pushed his way through, a hefty old man heaved up the steps and waved his arms for silence.

"That's all right for Bull Haskill's outfit. Who've we got to stand for us miners?"

"Big Jack Peters!" a hundred voices shouted.

"All right," the old man yelled, waving his arms again. "I'll do it. I'm scared to work my claim anyway with these backshooting polecats festerin' the hills. But I say let William Haskill be the boss of this stope—he knows everybody and he's handier with his guns than any man I know."

Cheers went up. "Now how about Jim Robinson? The Liberty's the biggest hole we've got, and he's got the most to lose." Bohannon stiffened as another roar of approval went up. Nobody stepped forth.

"Where is he?" Big Jack yelled.

"He ain't here," somebody shouted. "Go ahead!"

Name after name echoed back from the mountains. Bohannon took the jew's harp from his pocket and waited for an opening, studying the big-maned giant who had been first on the speaker's rostrum and whom he took to be Bull Haskill. Haskill was the boss, the one he'd have to deal with.

CHAPTER TWO

Rope's End

HIS head, crested by a rebellious comb of wavy iron-gray hair which jutted over his forehead, rose six or seven inches above the rest, even though he was standing hip-shot on one leg, and his back and neck were slightly bent. Twenty years younger, he must have been a titan; even now, gaunt though he was, he gave the impression of great strength. His faded gray shirt, its sleeves rolled high despite the cold, could not hide the weight of his massive, bowed shoulders or the breadth of his chest. Age had simply seasoned this man's toughness, Bohannon surmised, and wondered what had been used as seasoning.

Haskill was chewing tobacco with a heavy, almost savage chomp of the jaw. The muscles of his cheeks and mouth gathered like a nest of baby pythons; he turned his head in Bohannon's direction and spat a flood of tobacco juice against the floor with such force that it landed like a sack of lead shot.

Bohannon got a look at his eyes, very

large, yellow-gray in the firelight, coldly calculating and dominating, somehow combining the predatory expressions of an owl and a hawk, watchful and ready to act. He had a peculiar habit of closing and opening his right hand, as though testing it for a fist, which he varied with shooting his big thumb across his forefinger as though he were dealing silver dollars from a stack. His whole attitude was restless, his movements those of a man accustomed to action. Then Bohannon, connecting the movements of his hand with the Navy Colts slung low on his hips, realized the reason for the continual fisting—Haskill was fighting off stiffness in his knuckles. He was a gunman trying to outwit age.

As the twentieth man stepped up and took his place, Big Jack raised his arms for silence. Bohannon shoved his way up the steps.

"All right," Big Jack shouted. "That makes twenty—"

"—and I make twenty-one," Bohannon finished for him. Big Jack looked at him blankly, his heavy arms still upraised in the sudden silence. Slowly he let them down.

"You do, do you? Stranger here, ain't you?"

Twenty pairs of eyes fixed on him from the porch, a hundred bored into his back. Big Jack sized him up slowly.

"Son, you're a might cocky for a plumb stranger. You set that hat straight on your head afore you talk to me."

Bohannon met his eyes. "If any man in this camp has a right to hunt these killers with you, I have, and I can prove it."

The crowd behind him set up a restless rumble, chafing at the interruption, keyed to handle its own troubles.

Big Jack said, a slow scowl gathering on his forehead, "You'd better pull up your buckets and beat it. We've got enough trouble with people we know. Now, skedaddle—afore I serve you some barn-manners off the back of my hand."

A roar went up from the crowd. Bull Haskill's voice boomed over the din.

"Shut up, you mangy gophers, and let the man talk!" He stepped slowly up to Bohannon and stood looming over him, his yellow-gray eyes fixed and remote, but not hard. "You say you can prove a right," he said slowly in the silence. "Prove it."

"A man named Bohannon hired me and another hand to ride him guard up here with a load of cash to buy the Liberty."

"Wait a minute," a vigilante snapped from the background, his jet black eyes sharp with suspicion. "You say you're a hand. You don't talk like no hand I ever heard. How long you been out, mister?"

"Long enough to mind my own business. We were supposed to meet a man named Robinson down the back trail, to make the deal. We got there. Somebody jumped us. They got the money and killed Bohannon and the other guard. They thought they got me, but my head's too hard." He took off his hat and showed Haskill the graze on the side of his head. His voice was loud enough to carry to the front ranks of the crowd, and as the news fanned out, a dull rumble of anger surged up out of the rattle of talk.

"There's the reason my hat's cocked, Peters. And it's the same reason I'm number twenty-one on your committee. I don't like to think of those two being dead—no more than I like being shot in the head."

Big Jack smiled, his cold face breaking up into wrinkles like ice in the spring. "Sorry I took you wrong, mister. You was kind of sudden, but I don't blame you. What's the handle?"

"Jones'll do."

Haskill accepted that. "Did you see any of them?"

Bohannon looked at him narrowly. "No," he said slowly, "I didn't see them. But I know who did it. At least one of them. Robinson. Jim Robinson."

THE din of the crowd rose to a low roar. Big Jack sucked in a sharp breath and rocked back, his eyes wide and hard.

"You're crazy, mister! About time we asked you this—what's your game anyhow?" His eyes were as mean as a trapped bear's. "Maybe you rigged that holdup yourself." He took a step forward.

"Steady up, Jack," Haskill said, laying a big hand on the vigilante's hunched shoulder. "You've said a mouthful, Jones—better prove it. Jim Robinson is the biggest owner in this gulch. He's got a pack of friends."

Bohannon showed him the jew's harp. "Whose is that?"

Haskill examined it. "It's his, all right."

"It can't be!" Peters broke in harshly. "What's the play mister? Where'd you get this?"

"I got this off the ground where we were shot up. What's more, I heard Robinson playing it. It was the signal that put us off guard."

Peters' face sagged. "It's still a damned lie! Jim wouldn't do a thing like that. Somebody get him down here, pronto."

"We'll go ourselves in a minute," Haskill said. "Thorpe, go down the back trail and bring those bodies in. Some of you go help him."

Bohannon's face went a dull red as he eyed

Peters. "Old man," he said, "don't call me a liar. I found this harp where I said. For all I know, maybe you helped him gun us down. You certainly talk like it."

Peters lunged with a curse. Haskill jumped between them. "Jack, get hold of yourself. Maybe it is Jim. We've got to find out, that's all."

A sudden shrill screech rose over the crowd's ominous rumble. "What're you waiting for? Get the buzzard down here and hang him! He's been playing top dog around here long enough to be in on this meetin'. Why ain't he here?"

Haskill stepped to the edge of the porch. He roared, "I'm in charge here. Whoever did it'll hang by dawn, I promise you. Maybe it's Robinson and maybe it ain't. We'll find out."

Bohannon said, "He's the only one that knew that we were coming. I saw his letter to Bohannon. He told us to meet him secretly—and gunned us down like ducks, with no witnesses. A slick enough scheme, if he'd got us all."

"Take it easy, Jones," Haskill said ominously. "I don't blame you being sore, but we still know Jim better'n we know you. We've been robbed right and left for four months now, and the men of this gulch are mighty fed up. If they think they've got the gent that's been doing it, they'll tear him to pieces." He turned back to the crowd. "You men break it up," he shouted. "Go on into the Bullion and have a drink on me while we turn this thing around. Come on," he ordered the committee.

He led them out of the way, down around the building.

The moon shone bright on twenty cartridge belts and guns as he assembled them. "All you men but Big Jack and Jones stay here. If it's Robinson, we're going to need plenty of help when we bring him in. He's got a lot of friends and a lot of enemies. There's going to be a hell of a battle unless we're careful.

"Now listen. Most of 'em will be in the saloon. Hummel, you and Spence break out enough whisky to keep 'em there. The powder house is the only place we can use for a jail—I want eight of you to guard it. The rest of you keep the crowd in the saloon till he's in there safe—keep 'em at gunpoint if you have to. Let's go, mister." He turned and marched off up the trail toward the end of the valley.

THE scraped-hide windows of Robinson's shack gleamed yellow between the dark trees ahead. Haskill drew one of his long Colts.

"No need for that, Bull," Peters said. "Remember, Della's there."

"I'll mind my own irons without advice," Haskill said. He led them the last thirty yards up the steep side cove and stopped in the shadows of the trees at the edge of the cabin's narrow clearing.

"Go ahead, Peters," Haskill said. "I'll cover the door in case he makes a break. Keep out of the light."

"He'll make no break," Peters rumbled. "Jim's no thief, and less a killer." He swung a glance at Bohannon. "You've kind of muddied the stream tonight, stranger. If Jim proves he's innocent, you're going to answer to me—pussnell."

He lumbered up to the door and rapped.

"Who is it?" a high, muffled voice asked.

"Uncle Jack, Della, honey. Have to talk to you a minute."

The door swung open and a girl's figure was silhouetted against the light. She was holding a shotgun.

"Jim around?" Peters asked.

As she answered, Bohannon felt a little dazed. For two months he had heard only the harsh voices of men. This voice melted into his ears like music—sweet and cool as spring water, delicate rather than high, but with a lift of life underneath it. For no reason he recalled Martha's voice, and suddenly it seemed cloying, stuffed as the drawing rooms of the East.

She said, "No—I thought maybe he stopped at the meeting, Uncle Jack. Haven't you been down there?" She went on. "Come on in and have some coffee." She stepped back and Peters sidled his big shoulders through the door. "Why, Uncle Jack, what's the matter?" she laughed as he came into the light. "You look like—just like the time the mule kicked you at the funeral back in Joplin."

"Hush, Della. It's no laughing matter," he said gently. He turned in the door. "Come on up here, Bull," he called, his voice rasping with suppressed anger.

Bohannon followed Haskill into the cabin. She was standing back in the room, still holding the shotgun, looking from one face to the other, and, as she noted their grimness, dismay and bewilderment slowly gathered in her eyes.

"Why, what's the matter with you? What's happened?"

Peters jerked a thumb at Bohannon. "Ask him," he said with sudden savagery. "It's his story, not mine, Della. Whatever he says, mind you, I've got no part in."

Bohannon found himself looking into a pair of level blue eyes whose anxious, questioning look, as he remained dumb, slowly calmed and became reserved.

"Yes, what is it?"

He found himself wishing he could bite off his tongue. The words he'd had ready for Robinson, the accusation and condemnation, seemed like ashes in his mouth as he looked at her. Something was wrong. The answer was in her eyes. Had they been the least bit secretive or guarded, he would have been sure, but they were completely open, clear and honest. How could she be the daughter of a murderer and live in ignorance of what he was doing?

"I don't know, Miss Robinson," he said confusedly. "All I've got is some facts. You know about your father's deal with a man named Bohannon?"

She nodded. "It's not my father. My father was killed three weeks ago. Jim—my brother—was supposed to meet Mr. Bohannon on the back trail today. That's where he said he was going, this noon."

Bohannon took the jew's harp from his pocket. "Is that his?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Where did you get it?"

CHAPTER THREE

Law of the Lawless

THE words stuck in his throat. To tell her would be like whipping her in the face. He looked down at the little instrument in his hand and suddenly didn't believe his own accusations. It didn't make sense—it was impossible that this girl, standing there so slight and small, looking in her coarse, bunchy gray gown like a cameo wrapped in burlap, could be mixed up with murderers.

"Out with it," Haskill rumbled. "Let's have the truth. That's all I want, the truth."

"All right, Miss Robinson," Bohannon said, and told her what had happened. "Nobody but your brother and you knew about that meeting place and the time."

"It looks," Haskill said, "like Jim decided he might as well just get the money and keep the mine. It's just too bad this thing slipped out of his pocket. Where is he, Miss Robinson?"

She was staring at the jew's harp in Bohannon's hand. Suddenly her face crumpled and her hands flew up to hide it.

Big Jack was beside her instantly, his arm around her, comforting her, clucking softly at her like an old hen. He looked around at Bohannon and Haskill with an expression that made them draw back a step.

"Leave me alone, Uncle Jack!" she suddenly burst out, stamping her foot and pushing away from him. She stepped back and brought the shotgun up. Her face was a fiery red and her eyes flashed with anger through her tears.

"I'm sick and tired of all this. First they kill my father and now you're hounding Jim. I tell you now if he gets hurt, I'll go down to that town and shoot everybody I can see, including you, every one of you! As for you," she flared at Bohannon, "if you'll take the trouble to ask, everybody knows it's just one gang that's been doing all these things. Do you think a man would kill his own father?"

Suddenly Bohannon felt like laughing with relief. The tension was gone, and he knew with absolute faith that he had been wrong. The bitterness that had corroded his mind ever since he'd first suspected Robinson of double-crossing him vanished and the sense of his own gullibility lessened. Whoever had ambushed him, it hadn't been this girl's brother.

The girl gasped, "Now get out, all of you, or I'll—I'll—"

She stopped, her mouth open, her eyes on the door. Bohannon turned and saw a man leaning against the doorpost, a hand over his face. He fell to his knees on the doorsill. The shotgun clattered to the floor and Della flew past Bohannon.

"Jimmie! What's the matter? Oh!" Bohannon saw that the back of the newcomer's head was one big clot of blood. "Quick, Uncle Jack!"

Big Jack, cursing softly, picked the man up and carried him into the room. He put him on the bed, but Jim struggled away, got up and staggered cursing to a chair where he sat shaking his head and grumbling incoherently to himself. Della was at the stove getting water, and Big Jack poured him half a glass of whiskey, which he drank in two gulps. He sat limp, fighting off the drowsiness which Bohannon knew always followed a blow on the head, and Bohannon scrutinized his face.

It wasn't the face of a killer. Right now it was gray under its tan, and the eyes were fogged—but the cut of the features was fine, young and unschooled enough to have shown the imprint of duplicity and murder—he couldn't have been more than twenty.

DELLA worked on the wound, gently softening the clot and washing away the blood on his neck and back. Haskill came up beside Bohannon and said in a deep, soft rumble, "Give me the jew's harp, Jones. From now on I'm handling this."

Bohannon looked up at him. There was an ominous quality in his voice. "Just what do you mean by that?"

Haskill's eyes froze. "That's for me to decide. Give me that evidence. I'm in charge."

As Bohannon hesitated, he added, "if you want to stay on here, hand that over. Either that or get out of the gulch."

A dull roaring came up the mountainside. Bohannon looked through the door and saw a procession of torches lining down the trail. "Your men sure did a good job of holding down that crowd," he said. "Look what's coming. You made two mistakes, Haskill—getting them drunk and bringing the bodies up where they could see them. All right. I'll have to side with you to protect Robinson. Here's your evidence."

Haskill looked at him evenly. "If the evidence points here, Robinson will hang, girl or no girl. Do you see now? Your story's good or bad, whether the girl is pretty or not."

The noise of the crowd neared and Bohannon heard the crackle and spit of the torches. "Bring him out!" a shrill voice cried, rising above the surrounding bedlam. "Let's get him!"

Big Jack grabbed up the shotgun and waddled out of the door. As the leaders of the crowd burst out of the pines into the clearing, he loosed both barrels over their heads, and they ducked and dodged back under the shower of needles and branches that rained down on them. "Now get this straight, you bunch of broke-down muckers," Big Jack roared, throwing aside the shotgun and drawing both his six-guns. "There's gonna be no lynching in Hangman's Gulch. Legal hangings, yeah. But by the law, you pea-brained sons of a jackass, as long as Big Jack's on his feet. Now put out them torches, afore you set the whole damn gulch afire!"

Some of the torches lowered and were stamped out. Others were lifted higher and waved in rebellion. One burly miner shoved to the front and shouted at Big Jack, "We know you, Peters. You're a friend of his. Somebody's been robbing us for months. Now it's proven on Robinson. Get out of the way or we'll string you up along with him!" A volley of shouts seconded him.

Big Jack holstered his guns and stepped slowly out into the moonlight. "Come on out here in the open where I can tell you apart from the decent people. Come on out and I'll give you a piece of the law off the back of my hand." He dusted his big paws briskly and stood ready. Nobody moved, but a grumble of protest continued.

"That's fine," Big Jack said. "Now you're acting like humans. Just stay that way. We'll get the guilty one, never fear, and he'll hang for sure."

He came back into the cabin and slammed the door. Outside, Bohannon could hear the continued babble of argument.

Haskill stood over Jim Robinson, holding the jew's harp close in front of his eyes.

"That's yours, isn't it?"

"I've already told you that once," Jimmie said in exasperation. "What's this all about? Give me that thing." He reached for it, but Haskill jerked it away.

"You admit it's yours, do you? Then tell me this—how'd it happen to be found where two men were murdered and a hundred thousand dollars stolen? You were heard playing this before the shooting began. Explain that, Robinson."

"How in hell should I know?" Jimmie cried. "I can't remember a thing since I started out for—" he stopped short, his face opening with sudden surmise. "A hundred thousand? Where? Down the back trail?"

"Yes," Haskill pounced on him. "How'd you know that?"

"Because," Della put in acidly, "he was supposed to meet Bohannon there. I told you that."

"Bohannon's dead?" Jim said in a low voice. "The money's gone? They killed my father," he said bitterly, "to get this mine. Now they've killed Bohannon to keep me from selling it to him."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"I don't know," Jim said, holding his head between his hands. "I told you I can't remember. I guess in the mine, where I woke up. I don't know how I got there. I started out, and that's the last thing I can remember."

Haskill said sardonically, "That's too damned easy. The whole thing's pretty thin, Robinson. Nobody but you knew this Bohannon was coming up. Jones here heard you playing the jew's harp and found it where you dropped it. You figured on collecting a hundred thousand for nothing. You just made two mistakes, my boy. Dropping the harp and failing to finish off Jones."

"Hold on there, Bull," Peters put in. "That's too fast."

"Too fast for who?" Haskill boomed back. "What else do you make of the evidence?"

Jim sat up straight, his eyes clear and blazing. "You accuse me of robbery?"

"And murder. Where's the money?"

Jim's face reddened and then suddenly paled. "Do you think I'm going to kill somebody and then knock myself out? What sense does that make?"

PETERS stood looking at the floor between his feet. Della looked quickly from one face to the other.

Haskill said, "Jones, help me search the place. The money's got to be somewhere. Mind me, Miss Robinson, I don't like to do this—but we've got to find out for sure who's been raisin' hell in this camp. Maybe your brother isn't the one. But everything points

that way, and he has got to prove he isn't."

"No," Bohannon said. His voice was quiet, Eastern, with a sudden memory of civilization in the midst of this lawlessness and its sharp incisiveness brought Haskill around abruptly. "It's up to us to prove he did. That's the law."

Della looked at him blankly for a moment, and then her eyes smiled ever so slightly with relief.

Peters' eyes were shrewd as he said, "That's right, Haskill. We've got to prove it."

Haskill jerked a thumb at the window. "Listen to that crowd. I say you've got to prove he didn't, and you'd better make it fast and make it good. Meanwhile I've got to do my duty. Give me a hand, Jones." He began tearing up the bed.

Bohannon began looking under piled blankets, under the stove, among other furniture, feeling a curious apathy now. This night's violence was forcing him to meet life as he had never met it before, and he found himself balancing the tragedy of this girl and her brother, whom he'd never met before, against the tragedy back home. And suddenly, against the imminence of the angry miners outside, the latter seemed distant—even Martha.

He thought of her, as a man will of the woman he loves, in time of distress—lovely, graceful, golden—the queen of Richmond society, and she seemed as unreal as some picture of his childhood. A haze of fusty yellow hair, pasty white skin, and, he realized, pink, curled lips that were nothing but cynical. And lawless—the thought startled him. What had gotten into him?

Della's voice came to him. "What's the matter?" Again like sweet water, cool as the pines, and he knew what it was, and almost laughed. Of all the places and times to meet a girl like her.

He shook his head and the blur of his mind cleared. "Nothing, Miss Robinson. Don't worry. Your brother won't—"

He stopped short. Beneath his eyes, in a drawer, lay a package of green bills, bound with a tape bearing Blaisdell's name.

He heard Haskill come up behind him and stood up slowly. Something in his attitude must have told them. They came up and looked past him into the drawer. Haskill's big hand went down and picked up the package. The others stood as though paralyzed, each afraid to be the first one to speak.

"Robinson," Haskill said, "I hereby place you under arrest and charge you with murder and robbery. I'll have to take you down."

He rummaged in the drawer. There were no more bills. He counted them.

"Three thousand, about. What were you doing, Robinson? Holding out on your partners? Is that why they tried to kill you? That's it. You met them for the divvy, but you held this out. My guess is, they counted it and caught you." They stood silent.

Bohannon said, out of that far away Eastern conviction, where things like that simply didn't happen, "It sounds perfect—too perfect. I think it's a cold deck."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Dance

JIM ROBINSON sat loosely in his chair, his eyes dazed and vacant. He shook his head. "It's a lie," he said. "I never—oh, God, why can't I remember?" He buried his face in his hands.

"Peters," Haskill said. "We'll have to guard him close going down. I don't like the sound of that crowd."

A heavy fist banged on the door and it swung open. Big Jack whirled, drawing his guns. Three men came in, ducking their heads with awkward politeness.

"What you want, Gilby?" Big Jack said, his voice strained with hostility.

Gilby's pale, thin, conscientious face grimaced at sight of the gun. "Now, now, Jack, let be. Beg pardon, Miss Robinson," he said with a thin smile, taking off his hat. "I ain't a excitable man, Jack; neither is Fisher here, nor Luke, but all the same, we want an answer. Is it Robinson, or is it not? If so, we aim to take him down and try him as legal as we know how, and then hang him. If not, we'll just clear out, begging his pardon. Something's got to be done, Jack, and done definite. Let's have the answer."

Big Jack slowly holstered his guns and bit his lip. "I can't believe it of him, Gilby, but it looks like it's him. Part of the greenhorn's money is here."

"On your feet, Robinson," Haskill said. Jimmie rose slowly. He stood smiling wryly at Della and held out his hands to Haskill. "Go ahead and tie me up, Bull. It's your duty, like they say."

"No need. As long as you're peaceable. Let's go. And remember—I'm trusting you, Gilby, to help protect him from that crowd."

Della suddenly sprang at Big Jack, snatched a gun from his holster and stood back beside her brother, before they had a chance to move.

"Get out, all of you," she said, her eyes tortured. "Burn up the house if you like. But Jimmie isn't going to hang for something he didn't do. Take this, Jimmie, while I get the rest of their guns. At least we'll have a fight before we give in."

He took the gun quietly and as she started for Haskill, took her arm. "No good, sis—"

He handed the gun over to Peters and took her in his arms. "Thanks for trying." He kissed her cheek. "Better stay up here, kid. And keep your chin up."

Without waiting for an order he walked to the door and out. A hoarse shout greeted his appearance, and Big Jack flung himself after him, the others hurrying behind. Bohannon stood still.

"Grab him!" voices roared. "That's him, get him!" Two shots smashed through the uproar and Haskill's voice thundered.

"Anybody else try that and he'll get it in the belly, not over his head. Till Jim's had a trial, hands off. Now turn around and get on back to the Bullion. We'll try him there."

Cheers went up and slowly the crackling of the torches, the sound of feet and jubilant voices died away down the trail.

DELLA stood at the door, holding onto its edge. Bohannon could see her face working, and her knuckles white with the strain of her grip.

He got the whiskey bottle and poured her a drink. She looked at him blankly, as though seeing him for the first time. Then she knocked the glass from his hand and moved out to where Peters had thrown the shotgun. She came back with it and faced him, her eyes flickering.

"Get out," she said. "It's your fault. If it hadn't been for you, nothing would have happened. I'm going down there, and heaven help me to do it, if they sentence Jimmie I'll kill one of them. Get out before I start with you."

Bohannon looked at her quietly, and then slowly sat down in Jimmie's chair. "Go ahead, Miss Robinson—I don't suppose it'll mean anything to say I'm sorry. I've lost a hundred thousand dollars and a good mine. I've left my father a bankrupt through my own carelessness. I find I don't give a damn. I wish I could undo what has been done here."

She looked at him in amazement, unconsciously lowering the muzzle of the gun. "You? You lost—what?"

"I'm Bohannon," he said. "If you'll put down that gun, maybe we can work something out."

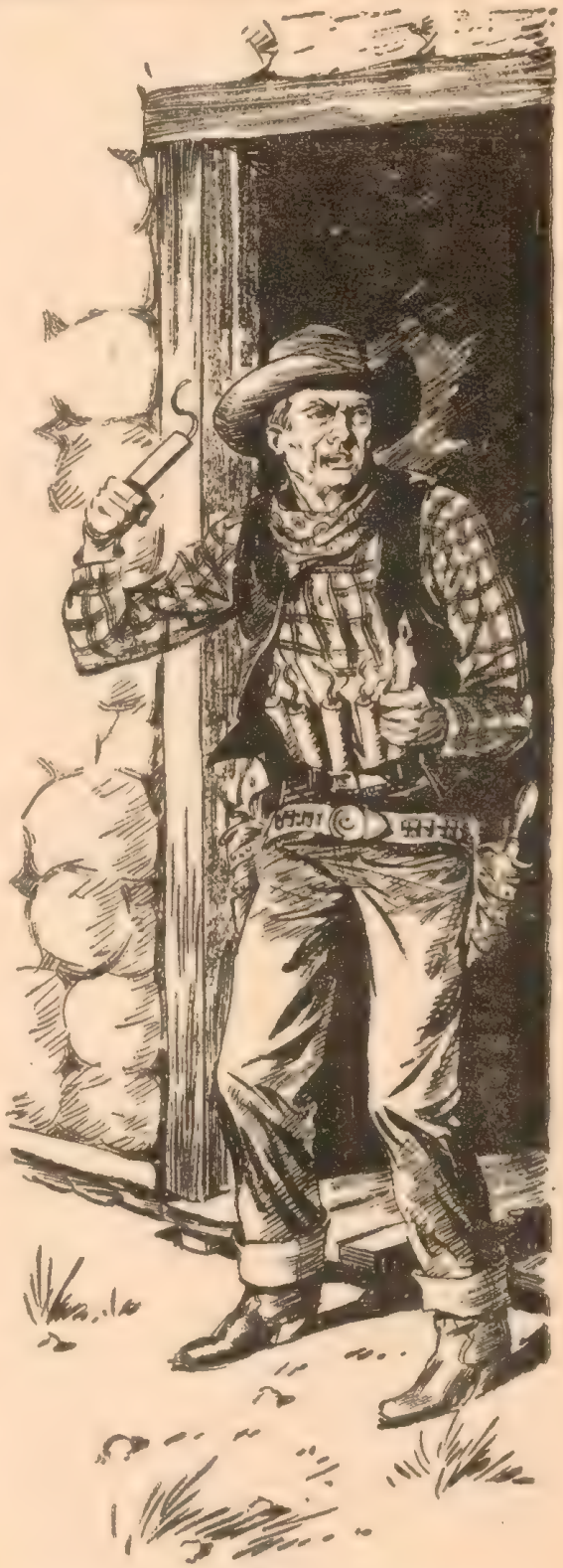
She looked at him suspiciously. "How do I know who you are? Maybe you're the real murderer, for all I know."

He rose and went to Jimmie's desk. He picked up a pencil and wrote:

Dear Mr. Robinson.

Thanks for your letter. I will meet you at the place and time agreed with money in federal and state notes. As you advise, I will keep this meeting a secret.

Anthony Bohannon.



"One more shot," Big Jack roared, "an' I'll blow the whole camp to Kingdom Come. . . ."

He handed the note to her.

"See if that doesn't match the writing on the note Jim got from me."

She looked at him doubtfully and, opening a drawer, took out the letter he had written. Silently she compared the writing and then sighed. "I'm sorry. Why didn't you say who you were?"

He told her of the threat he had received in Reno. "Whoever made it is out to keep me from buying the Liberty. If they tried to kill me this evening, they'll try it again—" He sat looking at her hand on the desk. "I still want your mine, Miss Della. That means I've got to get back my money. You want to save your brother, and so do I. That means we've got to find who murdered your father and is now trying to hang him. Whoever did that robbed me—so we'd better join forces, don't you think?"

There was a silence.

He looked at her with a slight smile. Suspicion and doubt still lurked in her eyes. She regarded him for a long moment, and slowly they softened. He found himself looking again into the clear depths he had first seen. His heart quickened a little.

"All right," she said finally. "I'll trust you."

He looked soberly at his handwriting on the envelope.

"To start with, somebody besides Jim must have known I was coming. The question is, who?"

He turned the envelope over. It had been cut open along the upper edge. The flap was still sealed. He examined the flap closely. He smiled slowly and then gave a short laugh.

He pointed out a tiny strip of exposed glue running along next to the flap. "It's been opened. That little glue line is from the first sealing—my sealing. When they resealed it, after they read it, they didn't pull the flap down quite far enough to cover the old glue line. Careless. But then, they figured on killing me, so why should they be careful?"

He wet the sealed flap and slowly worked it loose. He sniffed it, felt the underside with his forefinger. "Flour paste," he said. "I sealed it with glue." He nodded. "Sure. They wouldn't have glue up here. What for, in a mining camp? So they used flour paste. Somebody's been reading all our mail. They knew everything we planned—including the jew's harp."

The girl said excitedly, "Hurry, let's go down and tell them the truth!"

"They don't want the truth." He put a hand on her arm. "This isn't proof. We've got to find out who actually did this killing. Who handles the mail here?"

"Some of it comes in by friends and the freighters bring some. The regular run on the stage is handled by a man named Minnie. He runs an eating place beside the Bullion—the Steak House. He gets all our regular mail."

"All right, let's go. We'd better have guns, as many as you have in the house—"

He smiled at the little hope that was beginning to shine in her eyes, smiled to hide the prayer in his heart that he never would see that hope die into desperation.

She said, "They're going to jail Jimmie in the powder house because it's got stone walls and they figure nobody'll be able to break it. The powder house—" her voice shook a little.

ONCE more Bohannon stood at the rear of the mob densely packed around the gallows. Haskill stood on the platform while Gilby slung a rope over the arm. The frosty vapor of many breaths rose from the crowd, now suddenly silent. There was a general slow shuffling movement away from the gallows as the solemnity of their verdict came home to them with the sight of Robinson being led from the stone powder house to the gibbet.

The noose was fitted around Robinson's neck and the rope tightened. He stood quietly, looking at the rough boards under his feet.

Gilby's thin, strained voice came faintly over the heads of the crowd. "Jim Robinson, have you got anything to say before you pay for your crimes?"

Bohannon looked around for Della; she was gone. He drew his guns and fired a shot in the air. The men in front of him dodged, jamming into the crowd ahead.

"Out of the way!" he shouted, pushing ahead. His guns cleared a way for him but the crowd closed behind him again, and he could feel their puzzled anger at his back. He hurried, hoping that he could make it to the cleared circle around the platform before the surprise of his move wore off.

He reached the platform. Gilby's gun was leveled at him from above. "What is this—drop those guns! You haven't got a chance."

Bohannon holstered his guns, climbed the steps, ignoring Gilby, and faced the crowd.

"You're all forgetting one thing," he shouted. "We don't know who this man's partners were. If we hang him, we'll never know. They may be among you."

A threatening rumble of anger answered him.

"Get out of here, Jones," Haskill said, "before they mob you."

Bohannon put his hands to his mouth and yelled over the noise. "Give me till dawn to find out!"

The grumbling was broken by a volley of shouts and Haskill fired into the air. "Keep quiet! That's a fair deal," he bellowed. "If he can't find out by dawn, we'll do like we decided. It's only four hours."

A hoarse voice answered him. A roar seconded that and the crowd surged forward, swarming up over the platform. Bohannon battled uselessly and a dozen hands seized him. Haskill was shoved over the edge, thrashing and flailing.

Bohannon found himself lying on his back, pinned down by what felt like a dozen hands, staring up between legs and bodies at the gallows beam. Its underside gleamed dark and ugly red from the fires on both sides.

A second rope snaked across it and its noose dangled ready. Hands yanked him to his feet and others pulled the noose roughly over his head, scraping his wound open. The crowd had gone crazy.

The rope tightened around his neck. He struggled powerlessly, succeeding only in cracking shins with his boots, and then, as his arms were twisted behind him and yanked up, he was doubled over, helpless. Swiftly a cord lashed his wrists together. He stood up straight, panting, glaring at the cold and hostile faces around him.

The noose yanked tight, viciously. Jim beside him was dancing on his toes, gagging and choking, his face crimson. Then the rope jerked him up and he was strangling in the air.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lid Off Hell

A WHITE-HOT flash blinded him and he was drowned in the crash of a tremendous explosion, followed by hoarse screams of fear. The rope slacked and he tumbled to his knees. The platform was cleared as the men dived off into the wildly milling crowd, yelling now not in rage, but in panic.

Bohannon hit the floor, dragging Jim down with him.

A sputtering red spark sailed high into the air from the powder house. Again the earsplitting blast and white-hot flash deafened him as the dynamite burst over the crowd. Another followed, falling into one of the fires, and exploded, sending a great fountain of red-hot coals over the struggling mob. Another stick blew up the other in a second fountain of hell-fire.

Men stumbled over each other in panicky flight and piled up in heaps as they struggled to escape the square. Swiftly it emptied, the crowd flowing up into the tent-streets. Then the flood reversed and they collected again at the edge of the square opposite the powder house.

Bohannon and Robinson lay flat on the platform, peering at the open door of the stone house. Big Jack stood in the black doorway, holding a stick of dynamite in one hand and a lighted candle in the other. Sticks of dynamite were wedged into his waist across his broad belly.

A single shot cracked and the bullet smacked into the stone wall beside him.

"One more shot," Big Jack roared, "and I'll blow the whole damn' camp to kingdom come. There's enough powder in here to blow up a mountain and you know it. I'm king of this gulch tonight and I say there's to be law and order. Now get out there and rebuild those fires."

Absolute silence held the camp. The scattered fires glowed a dull red under the sharply glittering stars, hardly visible in the moonlight.

"Put out the candle, Jack," a voice quavered from the crowd.

"I'll put out the candle, all right, cause I've got a gal in here with a shotgun that'll blow the fust one of you to hell, even if I don't. She's gonna stay in here, too, till justice is done. Anybody want to try any more lynching tonight?"

Nobody answered. "Take it easy, Jack," Bull Haskill called. "They're quiet. Go on out, you men, and build up those fires again."

"You, Robinson," Big Jack called, "come on over here and get in the house." Jim got up and crossed the clearing. Bohannon followed and stood beside him. "Now listen, everybody. We're going to spend the rest of the night trying to find out who else was in this thing."

"What about Robinson?" somebody yelled in outrage. Slowly the fires began to glow up again, and the crowd wandered out into the square. "He's guilty, isn't he?"

"I give you my word as a peaceable man," Big Jack hollered, "that if he ain't proved innocent by dawn, he'll hang. If he don't, I will."

A low grumble of unwilling assent went up. Big Jack blew out the candle and poked the stick into his waist. "And now here's my last word. I'm gonna be amongst you tonight, and I'm gonna be wearin' this dynamite corsage I got on; and if any back-shootin' coyote amongst you pots me, it's gonna mean a big piece of the pop'lation goes wherever I go. Get me? Now, just to show there's no hard feelin's, everybody go get a drink on me offa Bull Haskill. In the bar, you bullheads!"

Big Jack summoned Gilby to the door. "Gilby, I trust you pretty good. You watch this door outside and if anybody tries to get close, let me know in a hurry."

He pulled Robinson in and as Bohannon followed, slammed the tin door shut.

HE PULLED the dynamite savagely from his belt and let it fall to the floor, then sagged down on a powder keg. His big face was old and gray; his shoulders hung slack. "I don't know how I got away with it," he groaned. "I was scared to death I'd miss them fires and land in the crowd. If they'd rushed me, I'd 'a been sunk. I couldn't have done it."

"Maybe you couldn't," Della said, her voice small and deadly, "but I would have. I wasn't fooling when I told you, Uncle Jack."

She was sitting on a case of dynamite, her white-knuckled hands pointing the shotgun at a keg of black powder in front of her. Cases and barrels rose tier after tier about them to the rock-covered log roof.

Bohannon saw her arm tremble, and then her lip. She looked once at Jim and suddenly laid the shotgun down and ran to him, clutching him in her arms and bursting into tears with her face buried in his shoulder. He patted her back and gradually she quieted. Finally she gave a great sigh and raised her head.

"You're safe for a while, anyway. We'll get you away. There's a back door. I'll get you a horse."

They stood in silence. Slowly she looked around at them. "What's the matter?"

Big Jack looked at the floor, his face tight.

"You're forgetting something, sis," Jim said. "Big Jack made himself responsible. They'd shoot him down in two seconds if he let me go."

"Hell, son, I'll go with you. Be damned to the claim. Let the robbin' skunks have that too."

Bohannon looked at them a moment, and then said to Della, "You and Jim have a grand vein up there. If you go you lose that. Not only that, but if he goes, he's branded a murderer and the ones who really gunned my men go free. Do you like that?"

Big Jack raised his head, his grizzled old jaw jutted out. "We supposed to like it? What the hell else do we do? I ain't goin' to sit here and watch Jim hang."

Bohannon sat down and said gently. "I guess you're tired, Jack. You're forgetting they're watching this place from all sides. Maybe there is a back door—I'll bet there're twenty men with sights on it this minute, just waiting for Jim to make a break."

Big Jack's head dropped a notch. "Lord, and I even forgot to put a guard on it."

"It's barred," Della said wearily. "Well," she added, picking up the shotgun, "I know one thing—they won't get Jim." She pointed the gun at the keg again. "As long as I'm strong enough to stay awake, they'll be afraid to come near this place. And I'll stay awake until I starve to death."

Big Jack sighed deeply, and heaved to his feet. "There's only one thing to do, and I'm the only one to do it. I got a powerful lot of friends in this camp—or used to have, afore I blew up them fires, anyway. Jim ain't guilty. Maybe I can talk up some boys to protect him. I'm going out and try to argue Haskill and his gang over on our side."

He stooped, picked up his sticks of dynamite and jammed them in again around his waist. "Sonny," he said to Bohannon, "you'd better scoot. There's a plenty'd like to tack up your hide for holding up the hanging. This ain't none of your affair, much—clear out whilst you can." He lumbered to the door, yanked it open savagely and banged it to after him.

Bohannon sat on his keg and looked at Della. She sat with her brown head bent, her face sad.

Jim raised his head and looked at her. "Della, you'd best hand over dad's guns. They've got me framed for good. The only thing to do is for me to is fight my own fight when it comes to that."

He stood up and she arose with him. "Stranger," he said to Bohannon, "I'm right grateful to you for trying to help out, but it's like Uncle Jack says. Della'll go with you."

Bohannon watched Della unbuckle her father's gunbelt and thought of his own parent, waiting now in Richmond for news. Somebody in this gulch had the hundred thousand that was to have saved him and, at the thought, Bohannon's hands clenched into fists. He looked at Della's strong, browned fingers working at the buckle. What would she be doing a year from now, if the thieves got away with this? Washing clothes for the miners? Slinging hash in the Steak House, while some robber worked the Liberty?

She passed the guns to Jim and Bohannon watched the heavy belt slap around his hips. He'd be on the long but fast trail to boothill, hunted and hated by every honest man west of Laramie. Two, three years was the most he could hope for before the clods were thrown into his mouth.

"Hold it a minute, Jim," he said quietly. "I've got just one little idea that may still pull us out. Della will explain what I mean. I want you to do just one thing—we've got around three hours left before dawn. Give me two of them. If I don't come back in that time—make your fight good."

Jim looked at him silently, his face pale and set. "If Jack an' I are going to get away it's got to be now. I might take 'em by surprise now, but not in two hours."

Bohannon looked to Della for help. Her face was full of distress.

"Then give me one hour," Bohannon said desperately.

Robinson sat down slowly. "All right. Go ahead."

Bohannon; his heart beating a little heavily at Della's smile, stood up, smiled at her, and shoved out through the tin door.

Outside, the night was bitter. Across the square, Minnie's steak-house still showed a light. Most of the crowd had dispersed, leaving only a few watchers huddled around the low fires, their rifles beside them. The hang-rope again swung from the gallows beam. He looked at the frosty stars, now brilliant in the absence of the moon. The sky eastward, toward the deserts of Nevada, was still a velvet black, but he knew it would not be long before the first treacherous hint of light would bring the watchers to their feet, and the whole gulch ravening down to the execution.

The Bullion's lights still glowed and a late crowd of drinkers sent forth a confusing babble. Next door, a couple of drunks lurched out of Minnie's, banging the door after them, and wheeled toward the saloon, their voices vying in a raucous bawl.

Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine. . . .

He crossed the square and followed the drunks into the saloon.

The bar ran along the front of the place, split in the middle by a big doorway to the dance hall and the gambling rooms. A narrow stairway led up to the second floor.

The place was jammed; men crowded at the bar and around tables, all drinking, a few playing poker with small pokes of gold and odd nuggets and a little silver money heaped before them. Two huge fireplaces roared at each end of the place and an iron stove glowed red in the middle. The air stank with rotgut whisky, sweat and woodsmoke. If there was an envelope in the place, it would be a miracle, and the one thing he had to have was an envelope.

He heard a screech of feminine laughter in the dance hall. If anyone had an envelope, it would be a woman.

He squeezed up to the bar near the door to the dancehall, bought a drink and studied the situation. Somebody was planking out a waltz fit for a drunken cow, and a flowzy old beldame lurched about the rough floor in the arms of a man built like a bear. He began to see his chance.

Three more women sat at a big table in the corner, cackling and leering at a crowd of miners who sniggered and fed them drinks out of their bottles.

The couple in the middle suddenly stopped lurching and broke. The woman lifted a beaded bag at the end of a white, fatty arm and with a hoarse curse, slammed the bear-man across the face with it. She slammed him with the bag again and he wheeled away. She stood in a towering fury, spitting words at him, then turned to the bar. She ordered a drink, then stood there, as two big tears formed in her eyes and rolled down her wrinkles.

CHAPTER SIX

Death's Messenger

BOHANNON put down his glass and walked up to her. He bowed, pulled out his handkerchief and offered it to her. She started to swing the bag at him, and stopped. She stood looking at him stupidly.

"A gemmun," she muttered thickly. "A hones' t' goodness gemmun." She accepted his handkerchief with a simper.

Bohannon grinned back stiffly. "Madam, it's a privilege to be of service to such a splendid example of womanhood."

Her eyes narrowed and she raised the bag a little. "What'd you want?"

He grinned. "Something that seems as hard to find in a mining town as a real lady." He held up a hand, counted off the items on his fingers. "A piece of paper, an envelope, and a quiet place to write a letter."

Her eyes popped and she let out a guffaw. "A puffick duck. C'mon, lambie, I'm tired." She grabbed his arm and gently dragged him toward the stairs.

The hallway upstairs was long, dimly lit and very cold. She lolled down the hall, bouncing off one wall after the other, to the end, and kicked open one of the rough doors. She turned up the dimly burning lamp and sat down on the bed with a plop, the springs screeching and twanging like all the harps of hell. She bent over and began fishing under the bed.

"Godda have a drink," she flubbered between loose lips.

She dragged out a bottle and, setting the mouth between her teeth, flung the bottom of it toward the ceiling. It glugged steadily. She let it down, sat swaying on the edge of the bed.

He walked over to her and leaned down. "Envelope," he said. She stared at him dully. "Envelope!" he repeated.

"Fupp," she replied, and put her hand politely to her lips. "Parm me."

He took out his watch and held it in front of her face. "Envelope?"

She smiled, and for a moment he did not realize that in the midst of her thickly powdered, aging face, the smile was sad, sweet,

and warm. "Sure, honey," she said. "An'-thing. An'thing for you." Her eyes blinked once, then heavily closed, and he had barely time to keep her from pitching onto the floor. She sagged onto the bed, snoring.

He looked at the watch. Half past four. In another hour the dead black sky would begin to liven. He stood still, his head sagging with despair. There wasn't time. . . .

In one corner, beside the board-shuttered window, stood a rough dresser. He went over to it and looked down at the dirty comb and hair-filled brush, the three bottles of perfume that stood on it. He opened the first drawer and saw a book with the word DIARY stamped in faded gilt on the cover. Old letters were stuffed between the pages.

He picked it up, opened it and looked hurriedly at the envelopes. All were addressed, "Miss Mamie Hemington," at various places.

Then in the back of the book he found a single unsealed envelope, dirty at the edges, but bare of writing. He picked it up and pulled out the contents—a picture and a folded sheet of paper. "Mr. and Mrs. Barnaby Hemington announce the marriage of their daughter Mamie Wilson to—" He looked at the photograph—a picture of a smiling young man which had been torn to scraps, and then carefully pasted together again.

He put everything back into the book except the envelope, put it in the drawer and took out the pen and ink. In the dim light of the lamp he carefully wrote on the face of the envelope: "To Mr. James Robinson, Liberty Mine, Hangman's Gulch," and in the upper corner: "From A. Bohannon, care of Blaisdell's Bank, Reno, Nevada." He sealed it and returned the pen and ink to the drawer.

On top of the diary he put his watch, and shut the drawer. She didn't need that envelope. And he didn't need the watch. There was no more use in looking at the time—there wasn't enough left to matter. And if there were too little left for this, his last letter, to do any good, the watch would never matter to him again anyway. He shivered in the chill of the dark room.

He looked at Mamie's bulky figure on the bed, went over and swung her legs up onto it. He covered her up with all the blankets he could find.

He put her bottle within easy reach, turned out the lamp and stepped into the hall.

HE STOPPED at the bar and tossed down three fast drinks. The crowd was even thicker than before, swollen by men coming down for the hanging. Tobacco smoke blurred his eyes like a fog, and the stink of whisky and sweat was thick enough to pour.

He shoved out the front door and the freezing night air cut into his lungs like a knife. He ran for Minnie's and burst into another welter of stench—more whisky and sweat seasoning a fog of grease-smoke.

At the back, a huge range burned. Miners sat on benches at a long table, gnawing slabs of meat or ladling down pork and bean soup. A big rack of pigeon-holes stood against the wall, with here and there a letter or paper sticking out.

Bohannon staggered up to the table and tapped one of the miners on the shoulder. He spoke thickly. "Where's Minnie?"

A thick thumb jerked toward the range. He went on back, carefully weaving and occasionally touching the wall for balance.

Four or five men stood around the range, each frying his own meat. One of them flopped his steak onto a piece of board and turned.

"Whoosh Minnie?" Bohannon asked him. Another thumb jerked and, turning, he saw in a dark corner an immense hulk, immobile as granite. He went toward it.

Minnie held a jug in one massive hand, resting it on a big knee. "Gimme steak," Bohannon mumbled. He couldn't tell whether the hulk was man or woman by the face, a great yellow-brown, smooth, oily expanse broken by a nose like the beak of an octopus. The straight black hair was pulled up into a knot on top of the somewhat pointed head, and from the knot dangled a single broken feather. Two black, unwinking eyes watched him. Minnie had Indian eyes and hair, but the skin and the smooth, bland expression were wholly Chinese. The wide, lipless mouth opened slightly.

"You got no coat," Minnie said abruptly. "You got gold? Twenty dollar'."

Bohannon fished in his pocket and pulled out the envelope. "Huh?" he said, affecting surprise, "whash thish? James Robinshun," he read, squinting, and saw Minnie's eyes narrow a hair's breadth. "Shuh letter. Oh, I f'got. Guy in Reno gimme it. For you. Here." He held it out. Minnie set the jug down and softly took the letter. His movements were as quiet and easy, and at the same time as weighty and definite as those of an elephant. He looked at the address for a long moment.

"Whersh shteak?" he insisted. Minnie's hand floated down into a box beside him and came out holding a slab of raw meat. With a delicate flip of his fingers, still looking at the letter, he tossed it to Bohannon and held out his palm. Bohannon grabbed the steak as it flew past. "On the housh," he said, and Minnie withdrew his palm.

While Bohannon was still frying the meat, Minnie heaved up, tucked his box of steaks under his huge arm, and waddled to the mail rack. Bohannon slapped the half-raw steak

onto a plank and followed him. He took a seat near the end of the table. He picked up one of the knives and forks that littered the table and pretended to eat, watching the big man out of the corner of his eye.

Minnie took a newspaper out of the rack and tore it open. Then, carefully, he wrapped the letter in one of the sheets and, still carrying his box of supplies, went out the door. Bohannon waited a moment and then went out after him in time to see him cross the porch of the Bullion.

He raced after him and pushed into the smoke of the bar. Minnie was gone. He stepped to the dance hall and, glancing up the stairs, saw the big Indian disappear at the other end.

He crept quietly after him and stopped on the stairs where he could just see over the edge of the top step.

MINNIE was standing before one of the doors, knocking. At the same moment it opened, the door across the hall was yanked back and three men strode out past Minnie toward the stairs.

Bohannon ducked, ran down quickly and by the time the three came down, was leaning idly over a drink at the bar, hiding his face with one hand. He looked after them; three vigilantes—Thorpe, Hummel and Spence, fully armed, and wholly sober. They went out and Bohannon stood thinking. Minnie passed him, his great flat face as impassive as ever.

"Five o'clock!" somebody bawled. "Drink up, you heathens! One hour to go till hanging time! Drink up, you many dogs—here's to peace in the gulch!"

Bohannon's heart was beating hard. He pushed himself away from the bar and gently loosened his right gun.

Leaving his drink untouched, he turned and quietly made his way up the stairs to the blank-faced door Minnie had knocked at. A heavy padlock hung from the end of an open hasp. It was the only locked door in the hall.

A faint glow of light showed under the door. Inside a rocking chair squeaked steadily. There was the deep grunt of a smothered cough.

Bohannon pulled his gun and cocked it. Taking a deep breath, he knocked gently.

The squeaking wrenched to a stop and there was a moment of silence. Then the chair sounded a final protest and heavy heels thumped across the boards toward the door.

Bohannon leveled the gun.

The door swung back. He stood still, his gun pointing at the broad, dynamite-fenced belly of Big Jack Peters.

They stood a moment in silence, sizing each other up. Bohannon stepped in and kicked the door shut behind him.

"Sit down," he said to Peters. Big Jack looked at the gun, his blue eyes hard as quartz. He sat down slowly.

"You shoot me with that thing, buster, and the hull top floor of this dump goes to hell with us."

"I'm not that bad a shot, Big Jack. I figure I can do better than just graze your head—better than you did to me."

Big Jack's mouth opened slightly with surprise, and then clamped shut again. "What's your game, mister? I've been off and on suspicious of you ever since you showed up."

Bohannon advanced on him. "Don't snow me under. Where's the money? The hundred thousand?"

Big Jack's upper lip lifted slightly from his broken old teeth. "The money. That's what you're after? Go to hell."

Bohannon said steadily, "I'll beat you into a swiss steak with the foresight of this gun before I see Jim Robinson hanging from your rope. This is what I've found out. Somebody intercepted my letters to Jim. Somebody knew when I was going to turn over that money. I just sent a letter to Jim through that big squaw, Minnie, downstairs, and he brought it straight to you. There it is in your hand. Peters, you're not going to look pretty, with your face hanging down over your chin."

Peters' face had grown pale and taut. He sat now holding the newspaper wrapped envelope loosely in his hand.

"This?" he said. "This is for Haskill. Minnie gave it to me to give to Haskill. This is his room. I been waiting here an hour for him, to try to get up a gang." Suddenly his brow gathered into a heavy frown. "I know it warn't me that shot up Bohannon. I was up at the mine all day. Ask anybody. Moreover I don't get no mail through Minnie. I get mine through Porter Curry, the freighter. Ask anybody that."

Bohannon's gun drooped slightly. "This is Bull Haskill's room?"

BIG JACK threw himself forward and slammed him against the wall with the full weight of his heavy body. Bohannon slid down, the breath knocked completely out of him, dimly aware of Big Jack's hands snatching his gun.

He shook his head stubbornly to clear it and tried to drag air into his paralyzed lungs. His eyes cleared and he looked up into the muzzle of his own gun.

"You made a mistake, mister, first claimin' to be Jones, then sayin' you're Bohannon, a gent that's been dead eight hours. Some place I smell a damn fish. What you got against Haskill? Or any of us here?"

Bohannon got to his feet and looked at Big Jack bitterly. A queer weariness was in his voice. "You damned old jackass. Open that newspaper. You'll see I addressed the envelope. I'm Bohannon all right. If you want to know why I didn't say so, I was warned, back in Reno, to stay out of Hangman's Gulch."

Old Jack grinned without mirth. "It would have been good advice for a Tenderfoot—though, for one, you learn fast. If I take my eyes off you, you'll jump me. Get in that closet, mister. I got an idee somehow it was you that worked that frame on Jimmie. We'll find out damned soon."

Bohannon said evenly, "When Haskill knows you've seen that letter, he'll kill the both of us."

Old Jack continued to grin. "I don't bite on that either. Git in that closet."

Bohannon licked his lips, hesitated. Then he turned and walked into the closet.

Big Jack slammed the door, and he heard a chairback being braced under the latch. A moment later the hall door closed, and the heavy padlock snapped home.

He stood, feeling about him in the pitch black. The closet was full of clothes hanging from two poles—coats, suits, fur overcoats. The floor was cluttered with boots. There was no usable weapon and out of his fatigue he cursed bitterly. Would even the final satisfaction of a fight be denied him in the end?

He pushed back through the clothes to the door and tried it and threw his weight against it. It gave, not at the latch side, but at the leather hinges. He threw himself at it again and again, each blow tearing the leather looser, until with a final lunge, the upper one gave and he squirmed out.

He examined the room, still without finding a weapon. He went to the window and threw the board shutter back from the scraped-hide pane. Then, turning out the lamp, he broke the pane through with his fist. Cold air poured in as he ripped at the opening.

This side of the Bullion was away from the square, and faced up the gulch toward the higher mountains. The drop down was a good twenty feet, but he might get away with no more than a sprained ankle if he hung from his hands.

He started to climb out and stopped short. Without quite reasoning it out, he knew the answer to his problem was not in getting away. He might steal a horse and make it to Reno, but the problem would be left behind, unanswered. More, his life would be left behind, for that other existence from which he'd come, had become strangely remote this night. Haskill was a murderer, and he could not quit now, knowing that.

He ran back to the chair and started to smash off a leg, and stopped, shaking his head. He was playing it like a fool.

He looked around the room. They would come in, would see the broken door, the open shutter, the torn window, and jump to a conclusion. It was worth a gamble.

He went back to the closet, threw aside the chair and opened the door wide. Then he burrowed through the clothes into a dark back corner.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Big Jack's Trust

HE DIDN'T know how much later many feet clumped up the hall. A key rattled in the padlock, the hasp slapped back and the door squeaked open.

"Light a match, Bull—the damned lamp's burned dry."

A dim flare sprang up over the clothes in front of him. A burst of cursing followed. "He's gone!"

The lamp flame glowed up and a man swore again. "Busted out of the closet and got out of the window."

"What did he say about this letter, Jack?" Bull's voice rumbled.

"He claimed you was the one that knew Bohannon was coming. He let on like he was Bohannon—though that may've been a slip—and that you was the one that gunned him down."

Haskill's voice was very low and soft. "And how'd he say I got hold of Robinson's mail?"

"Through Minnie."

"What do you think?"

"Me? So far's I'm concerned, it's just a story. I've knowed you a heap longer 'n him."

There was a silence. Then Haskill said, "Jack, it's the damnedest mixup I ever heard of. Minnie never brought me any letter—except my own. Thorpe—you go get Minnie." His voice sharpened. "Get him—and get him quick."

The door banged and boots ran down the hall. Bohannon's tired pulse skipped. Big Jack had known Haskill too long—he wouldn't get the meaning of that repetition. Thorpe was to "get" Minnie. And Minnie would talk no more.

Standing there in the dark, Bohannon wondered at the sureties he was developing in this exigent new life. His instincts were alive as never before.

Haskill said, "Spence, gimme that hat. See this beaver, Jack? It was Bohannon's. Now, you recollect, this Jones was shot along the side of the head, near the crown. See the rip in this here beaver? Don't it

match Jones' wound? One of them corpses below was shot in the middle of the forehead, and the other straight in the ear—no holes in anybody's hats. That proves this Jones is really Bohannon—he switched clothes down there to fool us. Why?"

Big Jack gave a low curse. "Why in hell didn't I see that?"

After a silence, Haskill said, "Here's how I'd figger it. Bohannon himself killed those guards, and—"

"—and shot himself in the head?" Peters laughed sardonically.

"I'd take a scalp wound for a hundred thousand, if I'd just killed a couple of gents, to try to prove it on somebody else—in this case Jim Robinson. Then, when he seen that wouldn't get him the mine, too, he figures to bribe Minnie to bring this letter to me and tries to get you to believe I'm behind all of this."

Big Jack's heavy feet began clumping around the room, accompanied by a mutter of cursing. The door opened.

"Minnie's dead," Thorpe's voice said. "Somebody called him out front and shot him in the face. Nobody knows who."

"The hell they don't. Bohannon's trying to cover again, Jack. He knew Minnie'd tell the truth about the bribing. He jumped out the window and went and killed him."

Big Jack rumbled, "Here we've got Jim locked up and this Bohannon's roaming the town. I'm going to let him out and then hunt that murderin' son into the ground."

"Wait a minute, Jack," Haskill said soothingly.

There was a soft blow and then the heavy jar of a big body falling. Bohannon gripped the coat in front of him.

That would be the end of Big Jack's trust.

HE CROUCHED motionless, waiting, and then Spence's whining voice came to him, in too low a key for him to distinguish words. There was more mumbled conversation, and he wondered at the new strength of will that kept him tense, silent, until finally heavy boots, more than one man, went to the door and down the hall.

Bohannon began working his way slowly out through the clothes, trying to avoid stumbling on the boots. He got to the door and stood free of the hanging coats.

Thorpe alone knelt over Big Jack's body, his two six-guns sticking out behind his hips. He was breathing hard, twisting a belt tighter and tighter around the old man's neck. Big Jack's unconscious eyes were open and bloodshot, his tongue stuck out and his face was a deep purple. Blood from the back of his head made a small pool on the floor. Evidently the plan was to kill him quietly.

Bohannon got within reaching distance of the guns and leaned over. He reached out, grabbed and yanked out a gun and, falling on Thorpe, chopped the barrel down on the back of his head three times. Thorpe fell across Big Jack's body without a sound.

Bohannon holstered the one gun, leaving the other on Thorpe, dragged him to the window and heaved him through. He watched the fall. Thorpe landed loosely, hitting feet first.

He ran back to Big Jack, but had no time to bring the other to, and rolled him out of sight under the bed.

Back in the closet he'd felt a leather bag. He got it out now, opened it, looked in briefly and snapped it shut. There wasn't time even to count it, but he could remember it perfectly—gold notes, silver notes, federal, state, private banks, any kind of currency he and Blaisdell had been able to collect.

He looked at the bag. Neatly stamped near the handles was: WILLIAM HASKILL.

He scattered the clothes and boots from the closet all over the floor. Then he picked up the bag and went out, leaving the door open.

He stood in the hall, trying to get his bearings. Minnie had knocked at Haskill's door, and Thorpe and the others had come out of another room. The only other door was directly opposite. It was unlatched, and he pushed in.

Feet hurried down the hall as he moved to the closet, flung in the bag and ducked behind the open door. From across the hall rose a hoarse shout of rage and the feet charged into the room. Bohannon, behind the door, drew his gun.

Haskill was cursing. "Which way would he go, you two? Are you in this with him? Stand back over there—keep your hands up—and tell me the truth or, so help me, I'll blow your guts out."

The two, Bohannon saw, were Hummel and Spence.

Slow feet dragged up the hall and turned in at the door.

"Thorpe?" Haskill roared. "Where in hell have—"

"You dirty, double-crossing liar," Thorpe said, his voice an agony of fury, "I know you now. You came back and knocked me out and stole the bag."

"You're a liar. Hummel, was I with you or not? Spence, dild I leave you? Thorpe, you lying double-crosser, you stole that bag. It's gone. Spence, look in the closet. If it's not there I'll—" His voice died.

Bohannon heard somebody scuffling in the closet and then silence. Somebody groaned, and then Thorpe cried out, "I didn't—"

A gun crashed and a body fell heavily. Another gun smashed out, and another, and then

as acrid powdersmoke filled the small room the sound of many feet running broke the throbbing silence.

"Give me that bag, Spence," Haskill commanded.

The thunder of feet flooded to the door. Bull Haskill's voice boomed out over the racket. "These three rats have been robbing me for weeks. See this bag? All my gambling receipts, all my profits. The double-crossing thieves, all three of them—"

"Why, you—" Spence's thin voice rose in outrage.

A shot roared, and then three guns pounded in shattering thunder. Big Jack's voice said heavily, "So it was Thorpe slugged me. How'd you get the drop on him, Haskill?"

Haskill said quickly, "He tried to hold me up. I watched my chance—an' look at 'em now!"

Bohannon came out from behind the door. Thorpe lay against the wall, blood trickling out of his mouth. Spence lay on his face in the middle of the floor. Hummel sat in the corner, head lolling to one side, his shirt front soaked with blood.

Bohannon said dryly, "Just keep your hands up, Haskill."

Haskill whirled to stare at him, his yellow-grey eyes burning with fear and rage.

Bohannon said slowly, "There's your murderer, Big Jack. Those aren't his receipts. That's my hundred thousand. You know how they read my letters to Jim Robinson. Hummel Spence and Thorpe bushwhacked us and left the jew's harp, after knocking Robinson out to get it. Haskill bossed the whole thing because he wanted the mine. He sent Thorpe out to kill Minnie because he was afraid Minnie would tell you the truth. And he slugged you because you were going to free Jimmie."

Haskill burst into a boom of laughter. Big Jack's eyes were narrow and Bohannon said, drawing the list of bill numbers he had salvaged from his pockets after the ambush, "Explain to us what my money is doing in your bag."

He threw the list on the bed.

Haskill's face had turned to stone. The crowd made no sound.

"Gimme that bag, Haskill," Big Jack said in a low voice. "I want to see them notes."

Haskill's eyes flickered from face to face for a moment, frozen and wary as a fox's.

Then he said, his voice hardly more than a breath, "Like hell I will," and jumped sideways, drawing and firing at the same time.

A RED-HOT sledgehammer caught Bohannon in the left arm as he fired. Haskill went down to one knee, swaying and firing as Bohannon dodged, slamming a shot at him. It caught Haskill in the shoulder, paralyzing his arm. The gun fell from his hand.

Bohannon went up to Haskill where he knelt and jammed the muzzle of his gun into his cheek, under his eye.

"Talk," he growled.

Haskill's big head began to tremble and fear crept into his eyes. "Don't shoot," he said quietly. "I did it! Don't shoot!"

Bohannon stepped back. "Take care of him, Jack. You'd best take him down and try him now. The crowd's getting set to blow up the powder house. I'll get Jimmie and Della out, and you tell them all what really happened."

He picked up his bag and pushed his way through the crowd. The mob was crowded around the powder house. He pushed through to the door. As he pounded on it, Big Jack's bellow rolled out from the Bullion's porch, summoning them all. He was standing at the top of the steps. Two steps down stood Haskill, hands tied behind him, his big frame sunken, his head bowed.

The crowd broke into a babble of questions and hurried off across the square.

Bohannon pounded again. "Della, it's me, Bohannon. It's all right. Open up."

The door opened a crack and he was looking down the barrels of the shotgun. Then the door was drawn wide and he stepped in. Della Robinson's face was pale and drawn with strain.

"It's all right now," he said. "I got Haskill. They're going to hang him now. Jim, here's the hundred thousand, and I want to talk over a partnership later."

She was looking at him with something like wonder in her eyes. Something like, but it wasn't quite. No one said anything for a while, and Bohannon wondered, looking at her, how far he could trust these instincts of his new life.

Jim looked at them narrowly, gave a quick grin and went out. "A hangin', long's it ain't mine, is something I don't wanta miss."

Bohannon looked at her and suddenly an intense feeling of shyness came over him. "This partnership idea—I know you don't know me very well, but—"

She burst into laughter that somehow frightened him. "How much better do I have to know you, after what you did for us tonight?" Suddenly her laughter turned into sobs and she was pouring them out against his shoulder.

He said, trying to soothe her, "We'll talk about it later. There'll be plenty of time."

Her sobs died down gradually, but he kept holding her, feeling curiously glad there was plenty of time for this new life he'd found among the hills.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 57)

REIN up, pardner, and parade out your knowledge of range savvy and the West. Do you know the difference between "airtights" and an "apple?" Then here's your chance to prove it! Try answering the twenty questions below. Answer eighteen of them correctly and you're plenty good. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you still rank high. But answer less than fifteen, and you rank with the "new grounders." Luck!

1. True or false? A white-faced cow and an open-faced cow are the same thing.

2. What is a "wheel horse?"

3. True or false? To the Westerner, the term "shove down" is used in reference to a cowboy dance.

4. A shotgun wagon is: A roundup wagon sent out independently of the larger outfits participating? A wagon used to carry guns and ammunition? The cook wagon? A calf wagon?

5. What is the meaning of the term, "put to bed with a pick and shovel?"

6. A "pumpkin-seed saddle" is: A very large saddle? A very small saddle? A saddle made of leather the color of a pumpkin seed? A saddle which has never been used?

7. True or false? A "night horse" is an animal which permits itself to be ridden only at night—never in the daylight.

8. If a cowpuncher told you he had "no medicine," you would know: He was ill and in need of medical aid? He was seeking a saloon? He had no information on the subject you were discussing? He had not eaten in several days?

9. When a horse is "Indian shod," what is it shod with?

10. In the slanguage of the Westerner, what is the meaning of the term "inner circle?"

11. When a cowpuncher is said to be "eating drag dust," what, in reality, is he doing?

12. According to the Western definition of the term, a "fan-tail" is a variety of pigeon. Yes or no?

13. A "cow bunny" is: A livestock animal which resembles a rabbit? The sweetheart or wife of a cattleman? A special variety of cattle having extremely long ears? An all white calf?

14. "Cow grease" is a cowpuncher slang term for what well-known food item?

15. "California moccasins" would most likely be worn: During cold weather? During hot weather? During wet weather? During a hailstorm? While crossing prairie dog country?

16. A "cake wagon" generally carries: Dessert? Blocks of salt? Cottonseed cake? Flour and milk?

17. Would a cowpuncher be likely to win much money in a "brace game?"

18. What is the Western meaning of the Spanish word, *bosque?*

19. The saddle horn is sometimes referred to as what well-known kind of fruit?

20. In the slanguage of the Westerner, what is the meaning of the term, "airtights?"

HALF PINT KELLEY

Half Pint Kelley was bigger inside than outside —and in all of Texas there was no grave to hold him!

MIDWAY of afternoon, Half Pint Kelley drifted down out of the llano wilderness into the Dipper range country, cutting sign upon all and sundry that he saw, and from the small passing items and his knowledge of the range, gathering a pretty accurate picture of the changes that had taken place. Most of the changes seemed to hinge on Riggs Boyce. He had too many lamed horses pasturing for this time of year, his beef was spread too wide, and he had too much vented stock.

"He's growing too damned fast," Half Pint considered. "No man is that smart, and no man that tough."

Reaching that conclusion, he also concluded it was none of his damned business until he began to run through increasing bunches of vented Long Mile stock. Tim Miles was a friend of his, and Lottie Miles was like his own daughter, and he didn't like the looks of this setup at all. First of all, Tim Miles didn't get fuzzed with liquor or play a loose enough game of poker to account for the sale of all this stock. Second, when a rancher began to part with his breed stock to crowd back upon his own range thereafter, he was getting down to the point where about all he had left was his gun and daughter—and Tim Miles was a lousy shot. That left Lottie as the final hole card for a payoff.

"Wonder what that damyankee hoss doctor is doing about things?" Half Pint asked himself. The question brought its own answer. Rice Pomeroy was the gent's name and he couldn't do much about anything except patch horses; he was a friendly, shy and sober critter with his New England blue laws stained in him to the bone. He still thought a gun was to shoot turkeys with, and he handled one just about that way.

"Bad enough to be a Yankee to start with," Half Pint growled to himself. "Wurse to be dumb enough to drift down here atop of it. But to be a likeable cuss on top of that—that's downright sinful. It makes shootin' him cold an act of manslaughter."

An hour later, Lottie Miles smoothed a wisp of rich, ginger-colored hair back with her wrist and looked out at Half Pint forming out of the running sea of lemon colored heat. He rode a trained jackass that had "followed him off" from some traveling circus in the past, and he stood a scant five feet and looked smaller in the saddle. Arriving on the installment plan, as it were, out of that shifting, distorting glare of heat, he looked like an emissary from the devil, a fact which several tough hombres had noted at times, but always too late for their memory to continue.

He came into the yard and lifted a shout that was prodigious for his size and, letting his animal amble almost through the kitchen door, he grinned and tossed Lottie a silver belt he said was made by the Indians over around Puma. It was a valuable piece of workmanship with precious stones set in it. Worn, but still discernible, was the name of a maker and a town in Spain, and the date of 1596.

"Half Pint!" Lottie said with an accusing rise of voice. "There was a big ranchero robbed over New Mexico way a couple of months back! Don't tell me your leprechaun brought you this?"

"Ha, him!" Half Pint scowled with indignation. "Not a sign of him did I see when I was needing company out on the lonely llano! It is a drunk he turned out to be and he stayed in the bottom of my last drink."

He looked through the crack of the door at a guest who had crowded shyly out of sight with his chair tilted back against the wall. "Competition," he grunted sourly. "And a damned Yankee at that! What is it Texas women be coming to?"

POMEROY darkened and brought his chair forward from the wall. He said with mixed humor and somberness, "It is a pretty bad end at that. What do you suggest I do about it, Half Pint?"

"Turn Texan," Half Pint told him instantly. "This is the only place in the world with a history reaching back to Rome where every hollering Lone Star man jist moved in." He started to spit and looked suddenly mindful of his manners, and with a gallant effort, swallowed his quid. "Texas is a state of mind," he said. "There is only one way to be a Texan and one way to stay a Texan and this is under the law of yore own gun."

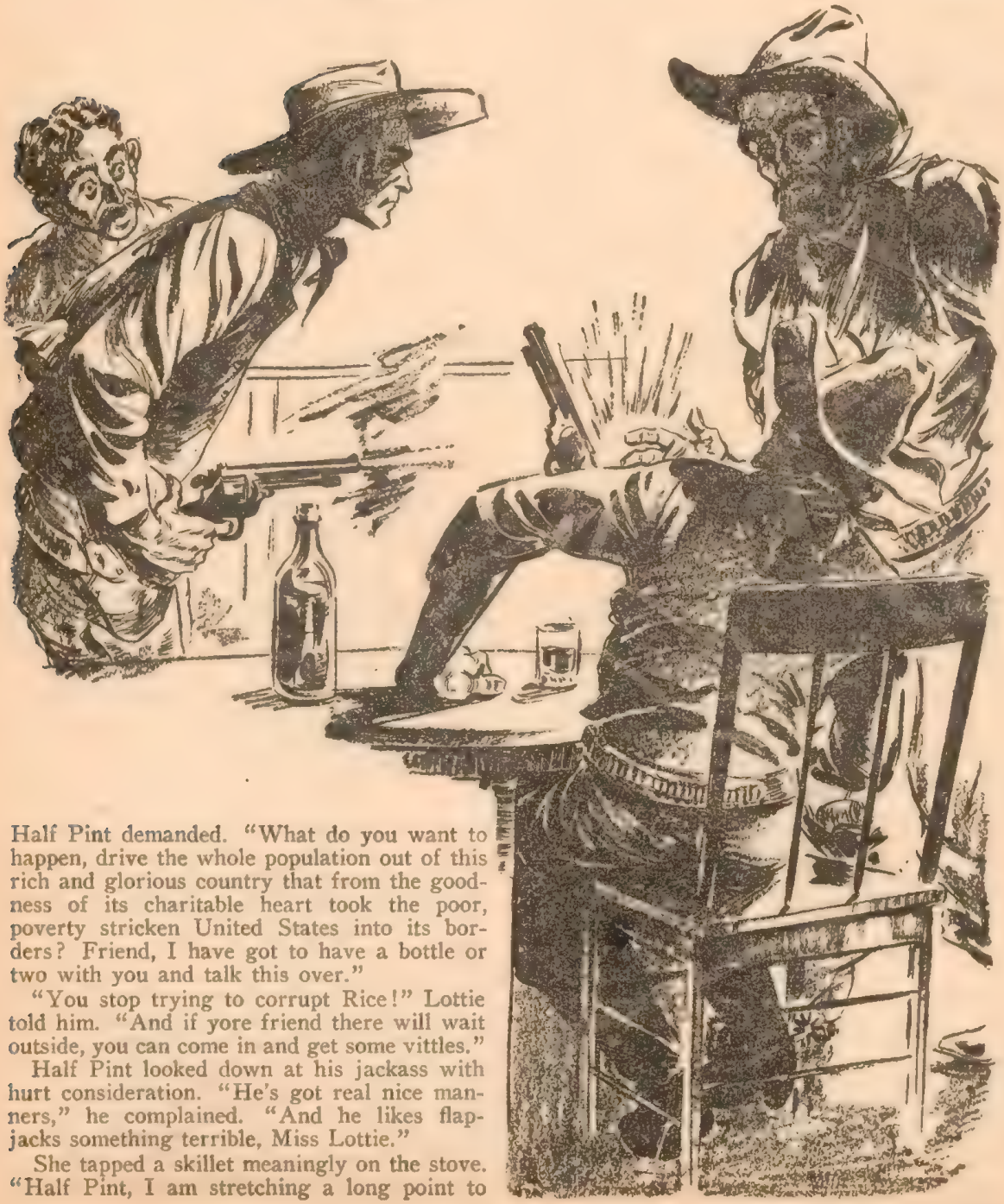
Rice Pomeroy dropped his friendly face above his hands and there was a disconsolate droop to his shoulders. "I calculate I wasn't cut of the right cloth," he said. "I always had an idea the law took care of the wicked and the bad."

"You mean real law with a sting in it?"

MAKES A TEXAN

By T. C. McCLARY

In a sudden wildness, Half Pint yelled the only word that came to him, which was, "Hoick!"



Half Pint demanded. "What do you want to happen, drive the whole population out of this rich and glorious country that from the goodness of its charitable heart took the poor, poverty stricken United States into its borders? Friend, I have got to have a bottle or two with you and talk this over."

"You stop trying to corrupt Rice!" Lottie told him. "And if yore friend there will wait outside, you can come in and get some vittles."

Half Pint looked down at his jackass with hurt consideration. "He's got real nice manners," he complained. "And he likes flapjacks something terrible, Miss Lottie."

She tapped a skillet meaningly on the stove. "Half Pint, I am stretching a long point to

let you in after six months knocking around every gopher hole in the llano!"

"I get the p'int," Half Pint allowed and backed out of her doorway. "I'll knock off some of this dust fust. Seems like them dry hills gets dirtier ever year. There was a time in Texas when a man only had to bathe on Alamo Day, but it's getting now to where he needs currying four or five times a year."

He disappeared for half an hour and then came in with his bantam gait, flesh gleaming red through curried whiskers and the smell of the horse pond fresh on him. He pegged his hat and took a ready and formidable position at the table, and sniffing with a man's hungry relish toward the stove, put his bright eye upon Rice Pomeroy.

"You," he said. "They ain't killed you hereabouts yet, Rice?"

"Well, I ain't been urging anyone, exactly," the Yankee told him.

Half Pint closed one eye and cut angle on the girl's face with the other. A gentle smile played at the corner of her full lips; most men in that country would have used that as an opening for a boast.

"Found something to do yet?" Half Pint asked.

"Oh, horse doctoring here and there," Rice said. He turned very dark beneath the burn on his lean face, and looked down skeptically at his laced hands. "Dunno if the horses have better health down here or don't take to Yankee doctors."

Kelley snorted. "Any Yankee lives longer'n six weeks down here is good as set!"

"Where, in boothill?" Rice asked with a tight grin. He looked at the girl and surprised a softness on her face and, suddenly self conscious, rolled his hat. When Kelley heaved up to the mountain of food she set before him, he made an awkward excuse and pulled out.

The girl leaned her straight back against the door-jamb, watching his plume of dust advance across the valley. "Aw, gee, Half Pint!" she murmured. "What did a sweet little fella like him have to drift in here for? They won't even give him a chance to make a living. And they haze him something cruel."

Half Pint gave her a privileged friend's sharp look. "Kinda sweet on him, ain't you?"

She darkened and dropped her head. "What if a woman were?" she asked. "She couldn't marry him. Not on this range—the boys would make his life miserable!"

"Every man," Half Pint stated with a flourish to his knife, "is big as the next one, once he knows it." He thumped his chest like a stallion pawing earth. "Look at me—you know they tried to put me inside a nail keg when I first come here?"

She grinned with a woman's swift change of humor. "All right—what did you do?"

"I worked me the other end out while the boys were fooling at the job and when Blacky Roberts went to jam my boots in, I went right on through and pulled his shoulders after me. Took him danged nigh an hour to get loose. They didn't try nothing much after that."

She laughed, but the somber mood drifted back up through her. "He wouldn't know how to do something like that to get himself set," she said moodily. "He can't rope well and he can't use a gun and he's a little fella." She looked suddenly near to tears. "There's no violence in him atall—fixing a hoss, he's gentle as a woman with his hands!"

"Well, we'll study on it," Half Pint told her. "If he weren't so almighty honest, we could make him sheriff or something, but we'll have to figure something else."

He stowed away another half dozen flapjacks thick with syrup and interspersed with juicy steak. "Yore pa shooting a good game of poker this season?" he asked casually.

He saw the instant tight look come into her face before she dropped her woman's guards. "His luck's running bad," she said hesitantly. "And his drinking's not too good either. I reckon he's worried . . . he's been losing a lot of stock."

"And had to sell some more to cover?" he asked shrewdly.

She nodded unhappily.

"Saw some of yore Long Mile vented up on Riggs Boyce range," he grunted.

THE man's name put feelings shimmering against the mask of her face. She took a long breath and her eyes steadied with a hard, metallic expression and he knew she saw what was coming—that in the end, a wedding ring would have to pay for her father's ranch. And he saw that she didn't like it, but was ready for the sacrifice when the time came.

Half Pint thought, *Damn it, this is robbery, and mebbe something wurse! She wants the other man, and this country needs a fust rate hoss patcher anyhow; my Jeff Davis there now, he's already getting a touch of gout and splints.*

His eyes came wide open and bulged, giving him the amiable look of a very alert and ornery gila monster. *Splints, now!* he repeated to himself. *A lot of those lamed hosses on RB grass had splints, and where they getting 'em from at this season and in this country, with the dust soft and thick?*

He pushed back his chair with an explosive series of courteous burps to show his appreciation of her cooking. "You was a little younger, Lottie," he said, "I would take you for my woman. But at twenty, a gal's too allfired sot in her ways."

"Why, you'd think I was an old maid!" she flamed at him.

"You sure ain't getting any younger," he allowed. He took out an evil-looking black plug and ripped off a chaw. "'Course, I dunno how he feels on it, but if I was a furriner, like this Yankee, I'd be taking that into consideration."

"Mebbe he's got no reason to!" she bit out at him.

"Unh," he grunted. "Well, 'course that would explain things then. I wuz wondering why he hadn't leastwise popped the question."

He saw that he had guessed it, that the Yankee hadn't said a word in that direction, and that his seed of worry was well rooted. He left a message for her father, and eased things off with another bit of "Injun work," this one a fine gold ring bearing the coat of arms of an ancient Spanish family. He chucked her under the chin, and winking owlishly said, "Stoke him up a little, Lottie," and with that advice to the lovelorn, pursued his amiably homicidal way toward town. Somehow he was going to have to make this Yankee show his toughness, and a woman throwing her pretty lips and rounded curves at a man could do a heap to get him feeling ornery.

He got into town with evening slipping into twilight, the lurid yellow light of the bars falling out into the thickening purple dusk. It was Saturday and most of the country had wandered in and a roar of mirth was coming from Mexes Bar. Inside, he found the Yankee reeling around like a run down top, and shortly he passed out cold across a table. The boys, under the spirited deviltry of Riggs Boyce, had framed him with some relay drinking, and in his desire to prove up to the country, he had drunk about ten to their one and it had belted him.

"One of these fine days," Half Pint glowered at the swaggering Boyce, "I am going to take you on and give you a lesson in he-man's drinking!"

Boyce grinned but didn't press the point. He was big and wiry and tough and something of a bully, but a man just in from six months on the llano was liable to be of uncertain humor, and Half Pint had established one advantage of a small man—his middle was not up where it should be, and it was a short quick reach from wherever his hand happened to be to his gun.

Boyce said. "Drink up, Little Bit, I want to ask you something."

"I will drink by myself—in decent company," Half Pint glowered. "But a drink has never made my tongue wag harder. What's yore asking?"

"You get around the llano country," Boyce grunted, "and I want to know if you've seen any of my rustled beef up there?"

Half Pint cooled and gave him a shrewd, interrogating look. "You've been rustled, too?"

There was a mocking surprise in the tone, and Boyce scowled. "What's surprising in that, Half Pint?" he demanded grittily. "The whole range has been rustled lately."

"But yo're the only one who's grown," Half Pint pointed out. "I am just marveling that a man can get taken and still increase his graze while everyone else is losing their shirts by looks of it, Boyce."

Boyce turned black and his lips snapped, but he was too calculating to be led into trouble by a crazy lobo's remark. "Mebbe," he growled, "I'm just smart enough for that, you sawed off jackass hunter!"

Half Pint thought of his animal's splint and grinned. "Mebbe my jack would have the answer to that!" he said.

For a moment, challenge hung between them, and then with an arrogant snort, Riggs Boyce swung on his high heel and pegged out to another bar. He left the toughest of the range still there, all hell and Saturday coursing through them.

Half Pint gave Rice Pomeroy's dumped, shadowed figure a scowl as he moved to the back of the bar, cursing the luck that would make a sucker of a man on this of all nights. Next to being yellow, being a chump was the

greatest vice upon that range, and he would be a long time living down the rough joking of this evening.

The sheriff was moving out in Boyce's wake and Half Pint stopped him to demand, "Rawley, why ain't you put a stop to this rustling?"

The sheriff's amiable expression swept from his face, leaving his mouth like wire and his eyes fiery and his jaws set. "Half Pint," he warned, "that is one subject hereabouts right now that ain't no joking matter! The man that puts the bee on those rustlers will be a man this country never forgets! They have damned near cleaned our best stock out."

There was a thread of irritation and real anger in the sheriff's voice, and from it, Half Pint judged that it was serious enough with Rawley—elections were near and his job was at stake.

"Mebbe you could stop it?" Rawley challenged.

"No-o-o," Half Pint admitted. "But mebbe I know the man who will!"

Rawley snorted with contempt and grunted of Half Pint's jackass, "You and Jeff Davis, of course, always do!" and stalked on out into the evening. The boys were flicking Half Pint with bright gazes, contemplating him as an ideal setup for some mischief yet to be figured—with a few drinks, they would get around to it.

KELLEY said a few hellos, but he had serious thoughts and retired to the end of the bar in solitude to converse with his special leprechaun in the red bottle. His leprechaun was his one disloyalty to Texas; it admitted no sovereign power except the Irish Kelleys, and in a sulky mood, would dispute them. The leprechaun hung in the neck of the bottle and looked at Kelley with disdain. Its piping voice grew stronger with every drink, and it was quite clear after the bottle was down mid-way.

"Kelley," it said, *"you are a damned desert addled idjit. Nothing will come of you trying to help a Yankee in this land."*

"It is the arrogance of you not to help any man!" Kelley growled. "But in this you might at least mind yer manners. There is a colleen and a matter of honor involved."

"Shame on ye, Aloysius Kelley!" the leprechaun said. *"And at your age!"*

"It is for the Yankee I am acting!" Half Pint hissed. "There is more to him than he knows himself, but he needs stirring, like a broth, to bring out the flavor!"

"Now it will be the poetry you're giving me," the small one cackled. *And what poetry, when you get started!"*

Half Pint glared at him, but the leprechaun remained safely within the neck of the bottle. "It is not poesy in my judgment," Half Pint gritted. "A man who can handle hosses with his gentleness has something in him."

"Horses?" the leprechaun repeated with shaken cynicism. *"Well there you have got me, Kelley. It is my weak spot and you are playing me for it, but for all that, I will have to give my hand."*

He gave a gurgling noise and disappeared completely. Kelley shook the bottle, but there was nothing left in it but the echo of the leprechaun's laugh.

"Lied and deserted me and laughed!" Half Pint growled, and grunted at Mexes, "Another of that red pizen ye'll be setting out here! It is the only thing reliable in this cursed country."

He had precisely one drink from his new bottle when Wild Bill Farmer came busting in, bearded and ugly with sourness at being too long alone on range, and boiled up by some special devil. Wild Bill was a giant of concentrated muscle, cruelty and violence, and in one of his black moods, with fists or guns or boots or chairs he was unmitigated mayhem. He roared for a drink and put a few holes in the ceiling to add emphasis, and swinging his red rimmed glare upon the assembled boys, ordered roughly, "All of you ding-dong blinketty blackguards get the hell out of here so a man can drink where it don't stink."

They scowled at him and milled awkwardly, waiting for the first one to breast him. Nobody being out of their senses, they made embarrassed reasons for being elsewhere and pulled out freight. For a moment, their sullen muttering and late bravado grew from on the stoop. Two shots put squarely through the doors put an end to that; there was a confused scrape of boots and spurs and then utter silence held the bar.

"That's better!" Wild Bill grunted at Mexes, but he didn't look it. He looked as if he wished the whole outfit had stayed and given him a means of working off spleen. Lifting his drink, he came suddenly conscious of Half Pint still at the bar, and turning to glare at him, stood with angered puzzlement to see the outcome of what was happening.

Half Pint had lifted his head at Wild Bill's roar, and a sudden look of marveling good humor settled on his knobby face. He shot Rice Pomeroy's inert form a single glance, and seeing no slightest sign of movement from it, listened with attention to the tinkling laugh of his leprechaun coming out of the badman's bellow. "And to think I wuz doubting yer loyalty!" Half Pint muttered at his wee friend. "It is marvelous the things ye think of on occasion."

He reached up and took his bottle and glass as Wild Bill's baleful glare fell on him, and moving hoop legged down the bar, planted the

two objects squarely beside Bill. He returned down bar to fetch a chair, and placing it beside the glowering giant, climbed upon it, which brought his eyes just about level with the other's chest.

Wild Bill waited this out and then exploded, "Half Pint, did you hear what I told them hombres?"

Half Pint drew himself to his full height and threw out his chest. "I sure did," he grunted. "There were a lot of them, weren't there?"

Wild Bill stared and then let loose a rattling roar of laughter and grabbed the small figure in a bearlike hug. "But don't think you've been too damned smart," he warned him with a swift return of ugliness. "You are going to stay here and drink even Steven with me, pardner!"

MEXES' toad-like eyes blinked and he gave an apprehensive look at the ceiling, but Half Pint looked completely at ease in the face of Wild Bill's terrible threat and thirst. Drink for drink he kept steadily with Wild Bill. It took Wild Bill three quarts, which he polished down in a neat three hours, and then the effect of the fast drunk began to gain. His head began to sag, and his legs grow rubbery, and with a last glazed effort of control, he reached a table and fell snoring on his face.

Half Pint looked over at him from his perch and said to Mexes, "I reckon you better not serve him any more."

Mexes wiped perspiration from his brow, and looked with disbelief at the reasonably sober Half Pint. The small man's broad lips pulled out in a grin of satisfaction and he climbed down to raise Rice Pomeroy from his trance. Rice blinked blearily and cut sign on what had taken place, and said thickly, "But he is twice your size, Half Pint!"

"Not when I'm on that chair he ain't!" Kelley growled, but a bright humor sparked in his eyes as he led Rice to the bar. "Did you never hear of the finger trick?" he asked. He made a gesture of sticking his fingers down his throat and watched understanding come slowly to the Yankee's honest face.

He threw a couple of drinks into Rice that brought his senses back, and the two were having an orderly discussion of mule versus horse sense when the toughs sensed a quieter bar and began to drift back in. They looked at the two men standing there, and then at Wild Bill's inert form, and back at the two again with mixed bewilderment, shame and a puzzled respect. From the looks of things, Rice Pomeroy had come to, and breasted Wild Bill's violent humor, too, and outstayed him on his feet, and this did a lot to change opinion of him.

Tim Miles came in to have a few drinks and then sit into a game with Riggs Boyce when he drifted in, and watching the progress of the game, Half Pint said to Rice, "What do you see there, Yankee doctor?"

Pomeroy shook his head and Half Pint taunted him into the game for an hour and then, riding home with him, demanded, "Do ye mean yer dam'yankee dumbness is so thick, those good doctor's hands of yer's could feel nothing wrong?"

"No," Pomeroy admitted. "The cards felt a little gritty."

Half Pint exploded an enormous breath of scorn. "Didn't ye notice that grit did not move?"

Pomeroy drew rein and looked at him. "Pricked cards! And Boyce has been winning for months—particularly off Tim Miles!" The surprise faded from his face, leaving it hard and set and dark. "Damn it, we ought to ride back and tell Tim!"

"And get him killed?" Half Pint snorted. "He ain't been able to hit the side of a barn since his hand was crushed, Rice. And you would be ridden out of the country for butting in. Unless you aim to build a personal fight of it?"

The Yankee's face fell away with shame. "Hell, why kid about it?" he grated. "I had a fight when I first came here, Half Pint, and got hell knocked out of me, and the boys won't forget it. I'll get no respect out of this range. I might as well drift."

"Well, if yo're that minded," the small man agreed. "It would kinda clear the air for Boyce. He has got the old man and the ranch hogtied between rustling and crooked cards, but that would give him the girl with no trouble atall."

They dropped over the rim of a coulee and saw a blaze of lights against the thick darkness that clung below, and coming opposite Mickle's place, saw the lights streaming from the barn. They drifted in, sending a hail ringing out before them, and Mickle came to the door of the barn in shirt sleeves and waved them in.

He gave Pomeroy a sour look, but said grudgingly, "Well, mebbe even a dam'yankee doctor is better'n nothing! That's my favorite mare, Goldy, and I can't loosen up that bloat."

The horse was down on the floor, ring-tied, belly bloated so tight the flesh looked as if it would snap. She was heaving and the sweat was pouring out of her, and there was a look of terrible misery and injustice in her eyes. Mickle was a tough gutted, tough minded hombre, but he couldn't look at his horse's eyes without sickness washing across his face.

Pomeroy brought in his saddle bags, and from the way he had to wash his pump, Half Pint guessed that it was the first call he'd had in a good long time. He talked to the horse and

after a space, the fighting strain and fear went out of it, and suddenly its muscles relaxed to a point where he could work with it.

Mickle watched the quiver of relaxation, and cursed thickly, and walked out of the circle of smoky yellow lantern light with a sheet of wetness on his brow. He took a chew off Half Pint's plug and stood outside with his head a rugged block of shadow against the lesser shadows of the night. The horse gave a terrific heave and rattling bugle of breath, and Mickle wheeled like it was the sound of a rattler, with murder settling on his face. He took a step forward with hands doubled into ramrod fists, and then stopped dead and stared as the bloat began to run out like a balloon.

Pomeroy cast the ropes loose and talked to the horse while he washed in a bucket and, coming back to its head, pulled it up onto its hoofs. It was weak and shaky but it was standing, and the hurt had drained out of its eyes.

"Damn!" Mickle muttered thickly, with the emotions of a horseman touched to the core. Some perplexing thought crossed his mind and he looked at Half Pint. He said, "It ain't right! An hombre has to have guts to work with a hoss like that! But he ain't shown any spunk since he's been in this country!"

"Mebbe he ain't had to," Half Pint grunted.

THEY had a drink and rode on out. Pomeroy was lost in dour thoughts. They came into the shack the Yankee called home and, looking around, Half Pint said, "Yessir, you sure need a woman!"

Pomeroy made a rough gesture and slammed vittles on the stove. Half Pint let him stew in his own juice until after supper and, feeling refreshed enough to start on a new bottle, cooked up a scheme. He said, "Pomeroy, you are damn near starving here—yore grub shelf shows it. I am going to take you out with me, pardners, on a wild jackass hunt."

Pomeroy's somber face lightened with interest, and then went dull. "I can't use a rope," he pointed out.

"We crease 'em," Half Pint exclaimed. "It will take some practice, but I can teach you." He scratched the outline of a jack on the packed dirt floor and pointed to a spot along the neck. "Mebbe you know what they call that nerve there, but it don't matter. You shoot so it jist jolts that nerve a mite without hurting 'em, and it knocks 'em out long enough to do yore roping."

Pomeroy gave a brittle laugh. "You could teach me to shoot like that?"

"If I can't, I'll shoot myself!" Half Pint nodded. His leprechaun suddenly appeared in the bottle and shook its finger at him. "Well, so to speak," he added more humbly.

Half Pint took him out to the llano and taught him to shoot with rocks and jackrabbits, but it was hard to teach him speed of draw. He had to key the draw to a word, and he had the Yankee practicing draw for hours while he sat comfortably nearby snapping out unexpectedly, "Hoik!" He had Pomeroy draw from every conceivable position until he was well night perfect.

"Almost," Half Pint admitted finally, "as good as I could do myself!"

Pomeroy grinned; he had lost a lot of his inferiority. "Then we're ready to start the hunt?" he asked.

Half Pint gave a chuckle. "Yore jackass," he said, "is Riggs Boyce, boy!"

All of the surety dumped out of Pomeroy in a single wave. For a long time, he stared off at the scorched horizon. "Half Pint," he said finally, "it ain't that I'm scared. It wouldn't matter too much if I was beaten. But given the chance, I just couldn't bring myself to shoot a man, no matter what. It ain't in me."

Half Pint's mouth fell open like two flapjacks. Temper boiled up in him, and nearly came loose, and then he saw the hopeless look in the Yankee's eyes, and held his violence to himself. He let it ride and they rode on back to the valley, and he waited for Lottie's effects to show on the man.

He knew damned well that it had worried her to know how Rice Pomeroy really felt, and that she sparked up to him like a fire running through high fall grass. He knew that because he trailed them to find out. He went home chuckling, thinking that by gum, that ought to make the Yankee raw enough to take on the devil!

Rice came in late, and raw enough to have been rope dragged, but the effect wasn't what Half Pint expected. What had happened was that the girl had made Pomeroy fully conscious of how he felt about her, but against that knowledge, consciousness of his dude uselessness was worse than ever.

It was a defeat for Half Pint; and he had only one salve for hurts and bruises—and in any case, he was thirsty. He turned to bad-tempered solitude to drink and fume and curse all of the small folk, but particularly his personal leprechaun. It popped out at him toward the end of the bottle.

"Ye've a damned sharp tongue in you, Kelley!" the small one told him acidly. *"And except that there is a colleen in it, I would leave you to blather yer big dumb mouth out with that Yankee instead of doing something helpful about it!"*

"Shut up!" Half Pint growled. "I am in no mood for rawhiding! What more can I do than I have done? I have taught him to be lightning on the draw and pick a bead at forty yards. I've gotten the girl to stoke him hotter than a pine fire. I've shown him this

Riggs is a cheat and probably a rustler and is taking over Tim and going to steal his girl with sharp tricks! But I can't get him mad enough to fight."

"Only a man dumb enough to leave the beautiful Emerald Isle for a sandtank like this would be so thick!" the leprechaun snapped bad-temperedly. *"Sure and it's a good thing King Kelley gave me to you to do yer thinking. Did ye see this Yankee downfaced the night he fixed up Mickle's horse?"*

"No, he was sure of hisself," Half Pint agreed. "A horse would feel that in him."

"Then use that big bump ye call a head," the leprechaun squeaked at him. *"If it is a horse that gives him heart, show him what this conniving Riggs is doing to horseflesh!"*

"Sure, now, ye've stolen my very thought, ye damned little thieving spirit!" Half Pint grunted. "But ye put in plain and clear to me, so I'll forgive ye."

Half Pint finished another bottle and was in a sprightly mood when Pomeroy got up at dawn. The man had slept badly, and was still tender with the feel of Lottie's soft curves nestling up to him, but there was no fire in him; the raw streak was only a drybed into a waterless lake.

Half Pint held his peace and took him riding toward the llano and, midway of afternoon, cut in across the grass where RB sick horses were ranging. He said conversationally, "That is a big remuda to be lamed up for this time of year, Rice. All of 'em good horseflesh, too; I can't figure how they would get lamed up like that except at roundup."

Pomeroy's interest caught and broke through the shame and lack of confidence that filled him, and the spark of interest in his eyes began to smolder into anger. He picked out curby hocks, capped hocks, bowed tendons, splints and founders. . . .

HIS sharply-cut face got muddy beneath his burn and he rasped, "Good Almighty, Half Pint, these horses have damned near been massacred while riding!" He let go his loop and brought in a pony and, getting afoot, examined the ridged coronet of its hoof.

"Hardpan and sandstone?" Half Pint grunted.

"At a hard gallop—and a lot of it!" Rice nodded. "But that's only part of it!" He loosened the horse and brought in another, and by the eighth one, the big vein was standing out like a venomous snake along his neck. An incredulous puzzlement shimmered atop his rising anger. "Some of 'em lamed for life, and every one of 'em from being badly shod by some butcher! That one with the thrush has got a hoof hot as a frying pan from a bad shoeing. A boy could do better in the dark!"

"I reckon it was done in the dark," Half Pint grunted. "Somewhere around the llano sandstone country."

"But why change shoes out there? Damned near every shoe was changed. They weren't kicked off!"

"If you was a rustler and wanted to double back through a posse, what would give you a better chance than different tracks?" Half Pint asked.

Pomeroy stood up with the glow of his eyes turning molten. In that moment, he thickened and took on power and stature. "They'd do that to rustle a few cows?" he grated. "Bust up good horseflesh like that?"

Half Pint made a gesture at the cavvy of invalids and spat. He could have sworn something heavy and metallic chunked inside of Pomeroy, like the fall of a lock's tumblers. He gave him a sharp look, and Pomeroy's face had the set of black lava, and his strong fists were doubled like knots of oak.

They rode back, straight past the Long Mile although Lottie Miles was coming out the lane in her buggy. Pomeroy's expression did not flicker; Half Pint doubted if he even saw her. It was Saturday and they rode straight into town, and without an instant's hesitation, Pomeroy got from his saddle and walked with a strong step into Mexes. But Riggs was not around and his pinto was not at the tie-racks and, to aid the search before Rice cooled off, Half Pint let it be known that Pomeroy meant to hunt down Riggs Boyce and pull out his liver barehanded. He stood for a moment with a gleam of satisfaction as one of Boyce's men went dusting full tilt out of town, and then turned into Mexes' for a bottle.

Half Pint was feeling in an amiable mood of expectation and feeling rather taken with himself. He had turned a placid, law abiding Yankee into a first class fighting man; he had made him mad enough to lick the devil, and he had found enough reason to satisfy the country that whatever happened would be self defense. It was going to make a he-man for all time of Rice Pomeroy. He was going to get his girl and save her father's ranch. And the country would be pushing business at him after this fight.

"It's damned near poetic!" Half Pint considered with self contentment as the light turned long and slanting and Riggs Boyce rode into town, his face full of affront and anger, and an arrogant light of murder in his eyes.

Riggs came into Mexes' and the town followed in, and somebody ran to tell Rice Pomeroy where to find him.

Riggs ordered a setup and looked at Half

Pint with a savage gun lust in his eye, and lifting his glass toward the small man grinned, "This is one fight I couldn't build and get away with, Half Pint—they'd call it murder! But it is a pleasure having it come from yore dam'yankee!"

Half Pint said sociably, "Oh, it was jist a notion hit him when he saw yore cavvy of lamed hosses."

Riggs expression stilled and caution laid a more deadly control on him. He drank slowly and set down his glass. "What about my hosses?" he asked with lethal softness.

The doors banged open and Pomeroy came in with an unswerving purpose in his step. His face was gray with anger, and his hands knotted into fists. "It is this," he grated. "You've murdered about thirty good horses, Boyce!"

For that instant, utter silence dropped on the room. Men were frozen in their tracks with startled anger. They didn't like any damned Yankee, and particularly one without the guts to fight, but it was horse country and they had horsemen's hearts, and this startling accusation spun through their opinion of Riggs Boyce like a roulette ball.

Half Pint felt the shift of their feelings, the throb of questioning that would turn to brutal ruthless anger against Boyce if this was true. Most of them had rustled a bit here and there and, except for their own losses, would not take that too seriously in another. But hatred of a man who intentionally crippled a horse was deep and primitive and instant in them. No man of whom it was said and proven would ever live on that range long.

A BROAD grin cut Half Pint's face like the cut in a slice of pie. He quietly poured out another drink and downing it, carried his bottle across to a table safely out of fight range. "Almost poetic," he repeated to himself. "And it was me that did it—without that damned conniving little leprechaun that haunts me!"

His special wee folk selected that moment to stick its neck from the bottle and grimace at him. *"Wurra, it's a fine thick-headed lout ye are, Kelley!"* it cackled at him. *"It is walking into a gun, ye've got yer friend a-doing, but he is too hot with temper even to know it! It is his fists he's going to try and use on Boyce, ye loco ninny!"*

Some sharpening of Riggs' eyes and face brought the crowd into instant motion rushing for the far wall. He moved a half arm's length from the bar, and his legs angled and tensed at the knees. His eyes narrowed to bare slits and there was a vicious slash of smile upon his face.

He said very quietly, "That is worse than calling a man a cow thief, Pomeroy!"

Pomeroy stopped and planted his boots firmly, fist-fight fashion, thereby making a perfect target. Anger built up and exploded in his eyes. "The way I mean it!" he grated, and his right fist moved back to start a ripping blow.

Riggs' lips twitched once and his nostrils flared and his lids dropped almost completely across his eyes. The smile froze on Half Pint's face. "A'mighty!" he muttered. He saw Riggs' arm tense, and that damned Yankee moving right on into lead. In sudden wildness, Half Pint yelled the only word that came to him, which was, *"Hoik!"*

Riggs' hand gripped around his gun. For the flicker of an instant, the unholy joy of pure murder drifted out of him, and then a shot exploded, and his gun went spinning, and he stood writhing, with his hand clasped to a sprained wrist.

Pomeroy's head dropped slowly and he stared at the gun which had unaccountably come into his hand. Bewilderment broke slowly through his raging anger. Out of his private thoughts, he mumbled, "I calculate I jist shot the first thing I saw moving! What I meant to do was bust him with my fist!"

The boys batted their eyes at this show of shooting dexterity, and reformed their opinion of him. Suddenly, big Mickle sent his laugh up against the rafters. "Sure!" he chuckled. "Jist kinda unconscious with you, doc! But while you've got that thing on him, jist tell us what you meant about them hosses."

Pomeroy's anger flowed back and he told them with a horseman's outrage of what he'd found. It was pure anger at what had been done to the horses, and beyond that, it still did not have much meaning for him. But it told a more complete story to the range, and it was a white hot molten fury that moved through the men.

Riggs Boyce saw it, and felt the brutal harshness of that mass temper and, backing in utter fright, came up hard against Half Pint's gun. Half Pint reached himself a chair and climbed upon it, and said into Riggs' ear, "It is the sandstone country you've got those dogies staked in . . . but where?"

Riggs fought for an instant at self control, and then saw the advancing line of angry men and coming unstuck, screamed suddenly, "Rockpool Valley—they're all there, I swear it!"

Sheriff Rawley barged in then and, aware of the votes that would be swayed by this, took over with pompous authority. A boy came in and whispered into Pomeroy's ear, and he flushed crimson, and looked cow-eyed toward the door, but he had to stand his drinks. He was getting pretty flushed when Half Pint gave him the finger sign, and caused an interruption while the Yankee

sneaked out back, and shortly found coffee, and then was breezing for Long Mile ranch.

Half Pint added his information about the cards, and then said of Pomeroy, "Well, of course, he ain't been in Texas long and he don't like to kill men!"

Mickle gave a hearty chuckle and a broad wink at the crowd and said, "He's proved up Texan enough for me and he ain't going to find his patience strained! Any man who naturally shoots that way and can stay and drink with Wild Bill when he's rampaging—"

Half Pint felt his own prestige being overshadowed, and unable to tell the real story, had to regain position another way. "Hell," he growled, "Wild Bill ain't nothing! If it is real trouble you want, watch out for the wee folk! If I'm admitting it, it is meself alone dares pull 'em out by the neck and tell 'em off face to face!"

HALF PINT'S leprechaun popped out with unexpected early arrival and raged from the rim of his bottle, *"Is that so, you blathering bag of Texas wind?"*

"See here," Half Pint grumbled with mixed indignation and humbleness. "You can't come here now—yer a half bottle early."

"Why you little ugly bump of a desert rat!" the leprechaun grimaced. *"It is how thick ye are without me to think for you! You forget yer own finger trick!"*

The leprechaun made a face and put the evil sign upon him and slipping quietly down into the sawdust, Half Pint realized the wee one had spoken true. It had been in his mind, but the success of his making of a Yankee into a Texan had been too much for him.

"I'll admit," he told the small one, "ye had a hand in it."

"Ha, so ye admit it now, do you?" the leprechaun squeaked, but less ruffled. *"It is a good thing ye did it in time, now, or I would have you telling the real story of that Puma jewelry while yer babbling the drunken truth!"*

"Think of the colleen," Half Pint muttered earnestly. "I will have to be best man at her wedding."

"Well, it is a quaint country ye picked, where a horse has to win a woman's man for her," the small one grumbled. *"But there is a touch of emerald in her eyes, and it would be plain shameful to have a scandal, so we'll be forgetting of it, Kelley. But there is one thing I'll not have ye be forgettting, in yer cups or sober."*

"Name it," Half Pint said.

"It was me that made a Texan of that Yankee. All you did was almost put yer big foot in it!"

"It was me that taught him to shoot and cut sign on them hosses!" Half Pint insisted stubbornly.

"That Puma jewelry—" the leprechaun reminded with a leer.

"All right," Half Pint agreed wearily. "Be gone from the sawdust now. I want a peaceful place to lay my head."

"Yer not so bad, Kelley," the little one said. *"It is just that Texan arrogance has gone to yer homely head. But I will be with you now at the wedding, and don't forget it!"*

"Never think it!" Half Pint vouched. He cocked open one eye to be sure the leprechaun was gone and then added, "But it was me alone that made a Texan of him!"

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In a moment the five men were ripping, punching, and Matt went to the tent. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Sent to Hell

THE bright morning sunlight streamed through the holes and patches in the old barn roof, laying a bright pattern over the sweet-smelling hay. One sunbeam fell upon the face of ex-Corporal Matt Kincaid, formerly of the Sixth Cavalry, Fort Scott, Indian Territory. He sat up, eyes still red and swollen from previous night's drink, a sickness inside him.

He heard the bugle very faintly, from across the river, the notes clear and distinct—reveille. He gathered his solid muscles, ready to spring up and move, and then remembered that this was no longer for him. After fourteen years in the corps, he was through—dishonorably discharged on charges of drunkenness and striking an officer.

Matt Kincaid sat back on the hay again, staring at the golden sunbeam now on his right arm, the arm where the gold service stripes used to be. He tried to force this fact through his still foggy brain. He was through as a cavalryman—thrown out.

He sat for a long while, listening to the bugler across the river. A cannon boomed, the sound re-echoing from the walls of the Rimrock Hills to the west. He knew that he should be on the big parade grounds now,

THE SUDDEN DEATH KID'S LAST RIDE

When the drums said, sadly, "Poor old soldier, poor old soldier, tarred and feathered and sent to hell, because he wouldn't soldier well—" Corporal Kincaid kept right on marching—till he came out on the other side!

standing with the troopers of L Troop for roll call, and then the orders for the day.

He got up, his head pulsing with pain, and stumbled over to the little window in the hay loft. Cobwebs were woven across most of the panes. One pane of glass was out, and the pure morning air passed through.

The flag was flying from the tall pole on the parade grounds. He could see it even at the distance. The east gate of the post was open, and a squadron was already moving out on special detail, the gray horses of Troop B.

Matt Kincaid watched them moving smartly through the gate, a dozen men in blue, forage caps set jauntily on their heads, shoulders back, tall and straight in the saddle, riding only as United States cavalrymen rode, and there were no finer mounted soldiery in the world.

The detail disappeared, and Matt Kincaid watched the rump of the last gray horse as it dropped out of sight over a ridge two hundred yards from the post gate. He walked back and sat down on the hay again, staring straight ahead of him, feeling the bitterness for the first time.

Coming across the river yesterday afternoon, it had not been too bad. He'd needed a drink, and he'd taken it. Then he needed more. He'd been drinking for eight hours steadily, trying to drown out the tune that was ringing through his ears. The band had played it, not loudly as he was paraded before the silent garrison, and then out of the gates—the *Rogue's March.*

Poor old soldier
Poor old soldier,
Tarred and feathered and sent to hell
Because he wouldn't soldier well. . . .

The words weren't altogether true, because he'd been a good soldier; the corps was his whole life, and he'd known nothing else since enlisting in the Army of the Potomac fourteen years before. He'd wanted nothing else.

Sergeant George Gibson had told him regretfully, *"Matt, you've been a damned fool. Drinking's bad enough, though you've always done your share along with the other boys across the river, but striking an officer now. Hell!"*

Matt Kincaid had known the penalty of striking a commissioned officer, even if that officer was a damned little shavetail who'd been a boy in short pants when he, himself, had been fighting in Lee's army in Virginia. The second lieutenant had arrived at Fort Scott on Wednesday, coming with the paymaster. On Thursday he'd crossed the river in the ferry and stopped in at McGill's bar in the disreputable little settlement on the east bank of the Paradise River.

It was evening, and Matt had been off duty with a half dozen other enlisted men. They'd been drinking since six o'clock, and he'd been feeling good. The second lieutenant had been peremptory in his demand that the troopers "get to hell" back to the post. He'd used language that Matt Kincaid couldn't take in his condition, and he'd been knocked through a window by Matt's big fist.

In the guard house, after the brief hearing, Matt had learned that the second lieutenant had gone on to Fort Leroy, thus passing out of the history of Fort Scott forever, but in those few brief days he'd been at the post he'd destroyed Matt Kincaid's life.

"Hell," Sergeant Gibson had growled, *"you know what discipline is, Matt. They got to throw you out. You get away with it, and every tough hombre in the regiment will want to try it himself."*

Ex-Corporal Kincaid started to pick the hay from the seedy black suit they'd given him with the discharge. His fingers were trembling and he needed a pick-up very badly. Down below he heard horses stamping in the stalls and he looked down the flimsy ladder which led up into the stall, wondering how he'd ever managed to make the climb in his condition last night.

THE bugler kept practicing across the river and Matt Kincaid remembered the boy—a red-faced, chubby German youth who spoke English very badly. They had been getting many foreigners into the corps lately—Italian, Scandinavian, German. They were crude in the beginning, but they made good soldiers with men like Sergeant Gibson and himself drilling them.

Matt climbed down the ladder stiffly. He found a rain barrel at one corner of the barn and doused his face and arms in the cool water.

Jack McGill, owner of the bar, the barn, and every building of the little group of structures across from Fort Scott, came out of the rear door of his establishment and watched Matt solemnly as the big man shook the water from his face.

"So," McGill said. He was a small man, smooth-faced, smooth-shaven, with a pair of mild blue eyes. He stood just outside the doorway, flexing his pink suspenders, a cigar in his mouth.

Matt Kincaid felt in his trouser pockets, and then in the pockets of his coat. He came out with four pennies and a dime.

He said, "Jack, I need a drink."

McGill nodded. "What happens now?" he asked.

Matt shrugged. He'd known McGill for a long time; had drunk McGill's whiskey for a long time, and he knew Jack as a square shooter.

He said, "Damned if I know, Jack."

"Hell of a business," McGill consoled. "I'd have slapped that shavetail myself. He was too big for his pants, Matt."

"I hit him square," Matt said with some satisfaction.

"It'll never pay for what you'll have to go through," McGill said shrewdly. "You got soldier all over you, Corporal."

Matt Kincaid felt the sickness go through him again. He tried to throw it off, to forget the business. It didn't work. He imagined the details moving around the post now. Gibson would be leading the new recruits to stables for the inevitable stable duty. Tough Lieutenant Fitzgerald would have his crack Troop M out on the parade grounds, going through maneuvers. . . .

"I'll get by," Matt Kincaid said. He had a vague notion of going East, getting a job, maybe working for a railroad. He knew he wouldn't like it.

"Big Tim's inside," McGill said.

Matt looked at him. He said tersely. "I'll have that pick-up outside, Jack."

Jack McGill grinned at him. "Tim's been asking about you," he said. "He knows you're out of the uniform."

Matt Kincaid nodded grimly. There wasn't much that Tim Cannivan didn't know. Canni-

van was an Indian trader, well-known at the post and all along the frontier. It was rumored that Cannivan had armed the Sioux in their epic fight against Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Cannivan was reputed to be smuggling liquor into the various reservations, which was against the law. Cannivan was supposed to be behind several recent outbreaks at the Crow reservation. Wherever a dollar was to be made dishonestly, Tim Cannivan was to be seen.

Matt walked around to the front of the saloon. He saw the little ferry coming across the river, a half dozen troopers aboard. He stared at them for several moments and then went into the saloon.

Tim Cannivan stood alone at the bar, a big, broad-shouldered man with a mop of yellow hair. Cannivan had a round face—a smooth, honest face, red cheeks, even features, but his eyes were narrow, small, greenish in color. He was grinning when the ex-corporal stepped up to the bar.

"Buy you a drink Kincaid," Cannivan said softly. "You look like you need it."

"Hell with you," Matt Kincaid scowled. He looked at the bartender and Jack McGill signaled the man to pour him a drink on the house. McGill stood at the end of the bar, smoking his cigar, watching them.

Matt downed the drink without blinking. He stood with both elbows on the bar, looking into the mirror.

He heard Tim Cannivan chuckle. "So you left the service, Kincaid."

Matt turned on him slowly. He said, "Anybody ask you, Cannivan?"

The big Indian trader shrugged. He toyed with his drink. He lowered his voice and he said, "Why be like that, Corporal? I might be able to do you a favor."

"Do yourself one," Matt Kincaid told him bitterly. "Go out and drown yourself in that river." He heard the troopers on the ferry out on the water. They were singing.

We're marching off for Sitting Bull,
And this is the way we go;
Forty miles a day on beans and hay
With the regular army-ho. . . .

Turning, he looked out the window and he saw them getting off the flat-bottomed ferry, leading their horses. In ranks of twos they started down along the river, the thin-faced, solemn Sergeant John Greeley leading them. Matt Kincaid knew Greeley well.

They were heading down along the river toward the encampment of the Baker wagon train at Elbow Bend, a dozen more miles to the south. The Baker outfit had been heading for Oregon when the trouble started at the Crow Reservation. A hundred bucks had skipped the reservation and were running wild west of Paradise.

Colonel Harrison, of Fort Scott, had issued orders to hold up all wagon trains headed across the territory until the bucks had been rounded up. The Baker party of thirty wagons and forty men, along with women and children, had been holed up at Elbow Bend for two weeks.

Tim Cannivan strolled to the door and watched the troopers riding past. When he came back to the bar, Matt Kincaid saw the tiny smile on his broad face.

CANNIVAN said softly, "You haven't even got a horse, Corporal, and you drank and gambled up every cent you had. You couldn't get east if you wanted to."

"I'll crawl," Matt told him. He went outside and sat down on the bench against the wall of the saloon. He saw two emigrants coming up with a team of oxen. They were solemn-faced men in homespuns, farmers by their walk. He recognized them, having been down to their encampment several times with Lieutenant Grimes of the Sixth.

They glanced at him, but he was sure they didn't recognize him in his civilian clothes. He had his hat pulled down over his face, and he kept it that way, ashamed to be seen in civilians even by these men who did not know him.

He watched them harness the oxen to one of Jack McGill's hay wagons. McGill came out to the barn when they started to fill the wagon with hay from the barn. One of the emigrants paid McGill.

Tim Cannivan stood in the doorway of the saloon, watching this. He said, "They're running short of supplies down there. There's not enough grass to feed the stock."

"So you're worried about them," Matt jeered.

"I have ten thousand dollars worth of supplies," Cannivan observed, "up at my Powder River depot. I stocked that stuff to sell these gents when they came through. There are at least ten wagon outfits waiting along the reservation for Army permission to go through. None of them can roll until the colonel gives permission."

Matt Kincaid spat in the dust. "If the Army let them move," he growled, "they'd lose their top-pieces in three days after they'd crossed the Paradise. "

Cannivan shook his head. "They'd lose nothing. I came through two days ago. They won't have a bit of trouble all the way to my depot. After that it's clear sailing to Oregon."

"Tell the colonel that," Matt scowled.

Cannivan grinned. "I spotted Rain Heart and the bucks who jumped the reservation three hundred miles to the south along the Squaw River. These wagon trains are being

held up unnecessarily, but who would believe me? The post would think I was trying to get them to rescind their order so that I could sell supplies to the emigrants."

"Which would be true," Matt said.

"And why not?" Cannivan said calmly. "That's my business." He added slyly, "Any of you boys at the post see those bucks recently?"

"No," Matt admitted.

"Ask Sam Benville where they are," Cannivan told him, "if you think I'm lying."

"I don't give a damn," Matt told him coldly, "whether you're lying or telling the truth." He wondered what Cannivan was getting at.

"So I lose money," Tim Cannivan said quietly, "and the emigrants go broke waiting down at the river for the Army to make up its mind whether the road is clear or not."

"They'll ask you!" Matt jeered. "A damned crook!"

"They can ask Sam Benville," Cannivan said. "An honest man."

Matt Kincaid looked at him. He said slowly, "Why tell me this, Cannivan?"

Tim Cannivan took the cigar from his mouth and tossed it away. He said, "Any time you need a thousand dollars, corporal, come and see me." He strolled away then, leaving Matt staring after him, puzzled.

A hundred yards down along the river Matt saw the encampment of a party of trappers. He recognized a small man in buckskins coming toward the saloon, licking his lips.

He said, "Hello, Sam."

Sam Benville stopped and stared at him for a moment. He scratched his head and said quizzically, "What in hell is this, Corporal?"

Matt Kincaid reddened under his tan. He'd known Benville for half a dozen years. The old trapper always had a few drinks with him when he came to McGill's.

"I'm out of the service, Sam," Matt growled. He gave the details briefly, and then asked, "You run across Rain Heart on the way in, Sam?"

"Them Crow bucks?" Benville asked. "We spotted 'em down along the Squaw. What in hell is the Army holdin' up them emigrants for?"

Matt asked, "Road's clear across the territory?"

"A child could walk across," Benville told him. "Let's have a drink, Matt."

Matt followed the little man into the saloon. He saw Tim Cannivan standing down by the ferry pier, chatting with old Jeff Hanson, the ferryman. Cannivan's back was toward him. He knew now that Cannivan had spoken the truth about the renegade Crow bucks.

"You pass that word along to the post?" Matt asked Benville at the bar.

Benville grinned. "The Army don't believe a damn thing, Matt, that it don't see fer itself. You know that."

Matt Kincaid leaned against the bar, looking out the window. He studied Cannivan's broad back and wondered about that thousand dollars. It was a lot of money, and he needed money to get away. He knew that he couldn't stay in the vicinity of the fort very long—it would eventually drive him crazy.

"So you're out," Sam Benville was saying, "an' you don't know what the hell to do with yourself."

"I'll find work," Matt told the trapper. He was still looking at Cannivan through the window.

When Benville went over to see Jack McGill, Matt walked out of the building and down toward the water. Tim Cannivan was just coming up the path from the landing, walking slowly, thoughtfully.

As they passed, Matt said quietly, "I'll talk to you, Cannivan, about that thousand."

Tim Cannivan said, "Walk down to my camp. I'll come along later." He was whistling as he went on.

Matt went down along the river, passing Benville's camp, nodding to the few men who had come in with the trapper. He located Cannivan's camp a quarter of a mile downstream, set back in a clump of cottonwood. Several Indian tepees had been set up, and one large Army tent which Cannivan had picked up somewhere. A sleeping buck was sprawled across the entrance to the Army tent, and the flap was closed.

Cannivan had brought a dozen men with him, several of them Arikara Indians. There were half a dozen breeds, and two dark-visaged French trappers. One of them Matt recognized as Louis Sipote, Cannivan's right hand man, a squat, grinning, broad-shouldered man with tremendously long arms and short legs. He'd put Matt in mind of a bullfrog the first time he'd seen the man.

Sipote strolled over from the campfire, a hunting knife in his hand, a piece of venison stuck on the tip of it. He said softly, "*Bonjour, mon compagnon.*"

"Hell with you, too," Matt told him. "You're no friend of mine, Louis."

Louis Sipote shrugged his massive shoulders. He had a pair of beady black eyes which flitted back and forth unceasingly. His teeth were large, very white. His nose was broken across the bridge and flattened against his face.

Matt Kincaid sat down on a rock and studied the crew grimly, comparing them, mentally, with the clean-cut troopers of his own barracks.

He stared long at the large Army tent and the sleeping buck in front of it, wondering what Cannivan had in the tent.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Bargain

TIM CANNIVAN strolled up a few minutes later and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot over the fire. He drank it thoughtfully as he watched Matt.

Matt said morosely, "I'll hear what you have to say, Cannivan, but say it damned quick. I don't like the smell of this place."

Cannivan grinned. He said softly, "Now, for a man who is about to make the quickest thousand dollars he ever saw in his life, you're acting mighty queer, Kincaid."

"What kind of a dirty job is it?" Matt wanted to know. "I still have some self-respect left."

Cannivan waved Louis Sipote away. He sat down on an overturned box and he began to make designs in the ground with the end of a stick. He said quietly, "You'll be doing some decent people a favor, Kincaid. That's all it amounts to."

"Go ahead," Matt said.

"These emigrants down at Elbow Bend—they know you?"

Matt Kincaid stared at him. "I've been there," he admitted. "They've seen me."

Tim Cannivan smiled. "That'll make it all the better," he stated. He went on smoothly. "You know that bunch is anxious to move, Kincaid. They've been using up valuable supplies while waiting for the Army to clear the road for them. They want to cross the river but the Army won't give them permission. They're decent people."

"You're not worried about that," Matt told him.

"No," Cannivan said, "I'm thinking of my own stocks up on the Powder. I invested a lot of money bringing things out there to sell to the wagon trains—at my usual profit. I need that money in a hurry and I can't get it with every outfit on the trail held up at the border."

"You want these wagon trains to move through," Matt said.

"The road's clear and safe," Cannivan stated. "Benville told you that, didn't he?"

Matt didn't say anything, and Cannivan went on quietly, "I want those wagons on the road whether the Army says so or not."

"So you'll tell them to start rolling," Matt Kincaid smiled coldly.

"No," Cannivan grinned, "you will—for a thousand dollars."

Matt stared at him. "I'm not in the Army," he stated. "Why would they listen to me?"

"You'll have orders from Colonel Harrison," Cannivan said. "You'll be dressed in a soldier's uniform which I have in my tent. They know you because you've been to the camp before. They don't know you've been discharged."

Matt Kincaid frowned. "It's a dirty business," he said grimly.

Cannivan told him, "It might take the Army another three weeks before they learn that Rain Heart is chasing Kiowas three hundred miles to the south. In a couple of days these outfits can be across the territory and safely on the way. If they stay here, they'll starve before they reach Oregon."

"I'm doing them a favor," Matt said grimly.

"You can look at it that way," Tim Cannivan grinned. "I'm paying for that favor. The Army won't like it, but you can be headed East the day the Baker Party pulls out. They'll never know who gave the order for the emigrants to cross the territory."

Matt Kincaid stared at the ground for some time. He said finally. "I'll take a look at that suit, Cannivan, and I'll see your money in advance."

"You'll see three hundred of it," Cannivan told him. "The rest you get when the last Baker wagon is over the Paradise."

Matt bit his lips. "When do I go down there?" he wanted to know. He saw Cannivan's eyes drift toward the big Army tent, and he looked that way also. Cannivan immediately turned his attention elsewhere.

"We can try it the day after tomorrow," the trader stated. "I'll have a few of my boys dressed up in blue also. They'll go along with you to make it look like a regular detail."

Matt looked at the men around him with distaste. "They'll never look like troopers," he growled, "no matter how much you dress them."

"They can stay outside the encampment," Cannivan grinned. "I'd like somebody to keep an eye on you, Kincaid."

Matt got up, his lips tight. He said, "Let me know when you want me, Cannivan." He walked away then, looking out across the river. It was high noon now, and the regimental band was practicing. He liked the song George Armstrong Custer's band had played when they left Fort Abraham Lincoln in search of Sitting Bull.

Fifty yards up the river, he glanced back and he saw Cannivan talking with Louis Sipote. Both men were standing in front of the Army tent, but the flap was still closed.

Matt went back to McGill's. He ate with Sam Benville at the trapper's invitation. Benville was headed for Jackson Point, a dozen miles east of Fort Scott. He pulled out at three o'clock in the afternoon and Matt walked down toward Cannivan's camp again. He saw Jack McGill watching him this time from the door of his saloon. McGill smoked his cigar and said nothing, but once McGill's eyes drifted toward the fort across the river.

An hour earlier Matt had seen Cannivan and Louis Sipote riding past McGill's place, evidently headed toward Jackson Point also. A half dozen of Cannivan's men went with them.

It was a warm, sultry afternoon when he entered the camp. The Indian Cannivan had had sitting in front of the Army tent was in the same position. He was awake now, and he stared at Matt stolidly as the ex-trooper came up.

"Cannivan here?" Matt asked him.

The Indian shook his head. He had straight, black hair with a blue feather twisted in it. His animal eyes met Matt's steadily. There were four others in the camp, two Arikaras, and two breeds, making five with the Indian guard in front of the tent.

The two breeds and one of the Indians sat on the ground, playing cards.

They looked at Matt suspiciously, but said nothing.

"You boys like a drink?" Matt asked them.

None of them answered, but he saw the look come into their eyes. The Indian in front of the tent licked his lips in anticipation.

"Hang on a minute," Matt said. He walked back to McGill's and asked for a bottle of whiskey on credit.

"Your credit's good here," McGill told him.

Back at Cannivan's camp, Matt handed the bottle to the guard at the tent. He watched the man take a long draught, and then one of the breeds got up from the card game and wrenched the bottle from the Indian's hand. They passed it around a few times, and then one of the breeds laughed.

Matt Kincaid sat down on a rock and watched them. He didn't drink himself. He had a cigar in his pocket and he lit this, puffing on it without relish.

The bottle was empty in half an hour, and Matt sent one of the Indians back to McGill's for another—on credit. He knew McGill would trust him.

The two breeds were singing now in French, poking at each other, making fun of the Indians. When the second bottle started to go around some of the humor left them. They were becoming maudlin now, talking loudly, blustering. Once one breed slapped at one of the Indians. The Arikara dropped a hand to his knife, but didn't quite draw it.

Matt Kincaid watched the Indian in front of the Army tent. He'd had half a dozen drinks already, and he was leaning against a tree, lips loose, eyes red. He started to move when the breed slapped at the Indian. These Arikaras, Matt knew, would stick together if anything happened. They'd gang up on the two breeds.

The second bottle was nearly empty when one of the Indians, after taking his draught, threw the bottle against a rock, shattering it. The breed nearest him swore vehemently in French. He swung a big fist and the Indian went down as if he'd been axed.

A second Indian leaped for the breed's back, bearing him to the ground. Matt Kincaid caught the flash of a knife blade in the sunlight. He stood up as the Indian in front of the tent plunged into the fight.

In a moment the five men were twisted on the ground, slashing at each other, punching, ripping, tearing. Calmly Matt walked to the Army tent and lifted the flap. He stared inside for a few moments, his eyes widening; then he let the flap drop again. He walked back to McGill's without another look at the five battling men in the camp. He heard the curses, and then a shriek of pain. He kept going.

SERGEANT GIBSON crossed the river that night with five other troopers. He found Matt Kincaid sitting at a corner table playing solitaire. Matt nodded to him.

"Still here?" Gibson said. He was a big man, red-haired, a veteran trooper.

"Expect to pull out soon," Matt admitted. He eyed the men in blue lined up at the bar and then looked down again at the cards. Sergeant Gibson slapped his shoulder and went back to the bar. He came back with a bottle and two glasses and sat down at the table.

He said, "We'll have a drink for old times' sake, Matt. The troop hates like hell to lose a good soldier like you."

"They'll forget," Matt said quietly. He knew he wouldn't. He saw Tim Cannivan coming through the door with Sipote, and Cannivan wasn't smiling. The big trader's eyes swept the room and came to a stop at his table. He said something to Sipote and they both walked to the bar without looking at him.

Matt shuffled the cards mechanically. He talked with Gibson for a long time. They'd been in half a dozen campaigns together. They'd ridden with Custer's Seventh before being transferred to the Sixth; they'd been with the long-haired general when Custer smashed Black Kettle.

Matt said, "Where do you boys figure Rain Heart is, George?"

Sergeant Gibson shook his head. "Colonel's damned scared of trouble in the territory," he admitted. "Rain Heart was a bad hombre before he came to the reservation. He's still bad."

Matt Kincaid nodded. At eleven o'clock Gibson and the troopers left. Matt stood just outside the door, watching them step on to the ferry. He heard the light laughter, the talk.

He was standing there in the shadows when a man said softly, "So you feed my boys

drink, Kincaid, and you don't like them."

Matt turned around. He saw Tim Cannivan's cigar glowing in the shadows. The bulk of Louis Sipote loomed close behind Cannivan. There was the gleam of teeth where the Frenchman's mouth was.

"Time drags around here," Matt said calmly. "A man gets damned sick of talking to himself."

"So you buy my boys drinks," Cannivan observed. "What did you see in that tent, Kincaid?"

Matt hesitated. He said softly, "What tent, Cannivan?"

"Those two guns," the trader stated quietly, "are going out to my post on the Powder River. I need them for protection."

Matt didn't say anything to that. He smiled in the darkness. It was a well-known fact at Fort Scott that no man in the West was safer on the open plains than Tim Cannivan. The trader had been selling to the Sioux when Custer and, later, Miles were chasing them. He was supposed to be a blood-brother to Crazy Horse himself.

Tim Cannivan didn't say anything for a moment. His cigar glowed as he pulled on it. He said then, "Be down at my camp at noon tomorrow. You can take your message to the emigrants as soon as you get into the uniform."

"There's a matter of three hundred dollars coming to me," Matt said, "now."

Cannivan paid him the money in bills, and Matt stepped to the light of the window to count it out. He stuffed the bills in his pocket and he said, "I'll be down, Cannivan."

"You'll be down," Tim Cannivan smiled, "or you'll be dead, my friend." He went away then, Louis Sipote following him like a big dog.

MATT KINCAID watched them until they were swallowed up in the darkness. Then he walked back into the saloon. He saw Jack McGill sitting at an empty card table reading an old newspaper. The saloon was quite empty now that the troopers had left. Matt sat down opposite McGill.

He said quietly, "What in hell would a man be doing with two Gatling guns, Jack?"

McGill kept his eyes on the newspaper and chewed on his cigar. He said, "A Gatling gun, Matt, is for shooting. A damned lot of shooting."

Matt Kincaid rubbed his big hands together thoughtfully. He'd seen one of the new Gatlings back at Fort Lane two hundred miles to the east. The weapon had ten barrels and it was crank-revolved, throwing nearly four hundred shots per minute. With it a small squad of men could hold off a horde of Indians.

"You buying one?" McGill asked him, looking over the edge of the paper.

"No," Matt smiled grimly, "but I've seen two of them less than a quarter of a mile from this spot."

"Fort Scott," Jack McGill observed, "is a half mile from here as the crow flies."

"I said a quarter of a mile," Matt repeated.

"So you did," McGill told him.

Matt picked up a deck of cards and began to shuffle them. McGill continued to read his paper. At eleven-thirty, Matt got up and walked out into the night. He started toward the ferry landing, and saw the bulk of the flatboat anchored just off shore.

Old Jeff Hanson, who ran the ferry, had a shack a short distance upstream. Matt could make out the shack and the light in the window. He saw a shape move in front of the light and he knew that Hanson was at home. Then he saw another shadow squatting on the rude pier close to the ferry.

Smiling, Matt Kincaid turned around and walked back to the barn. He went up into the loft and lay down on the hay, hands clasped behind his head, staring up into the darkness.

Turning his head slightly, he could look through the little loft window, across the river. He could see the small lights twinkling along Officers' Row inside Fort Scott. He watched the lights until sleep came.

He was up before dawn the next morning and he washed himself in the rain barrel. He walked around to the rear of the saloon and rapped sharply on a window.

Jack McGill said, "Who?"

"Mind if I borrow a horse, Jack?" Matt asked him.

McGill didn't answer him right away. He said, "Go ahead, Matt. Take that gray gelding."

Matt went into the barn and led the gray out of the stall. The gray was a big animal, solid in the chest. It had white forelegs. Saddling the horse, Matt led it around to the rear of the barn. He walked to the corner of the building then, and he looked down toward the ferry landing. He saw Louis Sipote sprawled on the flatboat, asleep.

He walked the gray a hundred yards upstream, away from Fort Scott, and then climbed into the saddle. He was screened here by a row of willows and he could ride away from the river without being seen.

He went upstream two miles, and then made his crossing of the Paradise at Jeffreys' island, a small sand bar, sparsely covered with vegetation. The water came up to the gray's hips here, but the bottom was firm.

The sun was getting warm now. Matt paused to wipe his face. He let the gray drink, and then he started due west, making a circuit

of Fort Scott, hoping he wouldn't run into a detail.

He kept going until he reached a rocky ridge a mile back from the Paradise and south of Fort Scott. The ridge commanded a view of the Paradise for half a dozen miles as it twisted across the open plain, blue water with a border of green against the tawny color of the plains.

He spotted Hanson's ferry moving across toward the post, and the half dozen buildings which comprised Jack McGill's establishment. Blue smoke curled up from the bank where Tim Cannivan was encamped, and Matt watched this spot closely.

Below the ridge he'd staked the gray so that it could not be seen by anyone passing by. He lay on his stomach on the hot ridge, shading his eyes from the sun, watching the river.

Over at Fort Scott he saw the wood detail moving out the west gate, going down along Red Creek with the wagons. He could see over the top of the eight foot high log stockade, and on the parade grounds a troop was drilling. Matt Kincaid watched them enviously, noting the little clouds of dust they raised when they raced across the bare patch at the north edge of the grounds.

He figured the time to be nine o'clock in the morning when he spotted the log raft being pushed out from shore near Cannivan's encampment. There were five men on the raft and two objects covered with tarpaulins.

Matt Kincaid raised himself on his elbows. The raft was pushed out into midstream, and then permitted to float down the river a quarter of a mile until it was around a bend and out of sight of Fort Scott. Then the men on the raft worked feverishly to bring it ashore.

Four horses had already been taken across the river, and Matt saw them being led out of concealment of the cottonwood grove as the raft edged in toward the shore.

When it touched the opposite bank, the two objects were wheeled up on the sand and the horses, already harnessed, backed up to them. The tarpaulins were still tied over the two objects, but Matt could make out the wheels. They were the Gatling guns.

The party moved through the cottonwoods and across the plains, headed west, past the ridge on which Matt was lying. They came to within a quarter of a mile of the slope, the riders urging the horses on as fast as they could go, the two guns raising a small cloud of dust as they went by.

Matt Kincaid stared toward the distant Rimrock Hills, a low, undulating line across the sky. He got up and walked down to his horse. He waited until the dust cloud was some distance away, and then followed it, keeping behind the ridges as much as possible.

The land started to rise here, going up into the hills. Four miles from the ridge on which he'd been sitting, they fell into the Oregon Trail trace, deeply rutted in the plains, heading straight for the Rimrocks and Avalanche Pass, a low cut in the hills.

Thoughtfully Matt headed away from the trace, riding through a series of low hills to the north of Avalanche Pass. It was past eleven o'clock in the morning when he approached the pass from the north. He had to go through thick growths of lodgepole pine, a still, silent forest where the hoofbeats of the gray made no sound against the foot deep pine needle floor.

CHAPTER THREE

Brimstone Rider of Bullet Pass

HE DISMOUNTED a quarter of a mile from the pass and went forward on foot through the trees. Moving silently through the rocks, he stopped within fifty yards of Louis Sipote and one of the breeds, trying to bring one of the Gatling Guns up on the slope adjacent to the pass, which was less than fifty yards across at this point. Directly across the pass, Matt saw the other gun, and three men with it. This gun was already in position, facing the trail, lowered so that it could rake whatever came through.

Sipote was turning the other gun around now, setting rocks up against the wheels so that it would not roll, cutting green boughs from the trees now and draping them over the guns to conceal them from below. Matt felt the sweat break out on his face.

Cannivan had lied about the supplies up at his Powder River depot. The big trader wanted the emigrants across the Paradise on dangerous ground where the Army had forbidden them to go.

In the dark recesses of Avalanche Pass, fifteen miles from Fort Scott, Cannivan could destroy the party and take the wagons and supplies. Each wagon, loaded, would be worth at least five thousand dollars. Thirty wagons in the party would net Cannivan one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The massacre would be attributed to Rain Heart's renegade bucks from the reservation. Cannivan's Indians and breeds could make it look as if the red riders had struck the train. He could leave half a dozen burned up wagons behind him, scattered on the pass floor. With the remaining wagons and the supplies and stock, he could head due south, and possibly keep going all the way to Santa Fe, where he could make ten thousand dollars on each wagon and the contents.

Matt Kincaid stumbled away from the place, not willing to believe his eyes. He'd known for years, and every Army man at Fort Scott

had known, that Tim Cannivan was involved in dirty business out on the open plains, but it didn't seem possible that Cannivan would go this far.

The gray horse was stamping in a thick clump of pine when Matt came back. He was about to put his boot in the stirrup when a man said softly, "Just hold it where it is, Matt."

Matt Kincaid came around slowly. He stood next to the gray, one hand on the horse's neck.

He said, "What in hell you doing here, Jack?"

Jack McGill sat on a fallen log a half dozen yards away. He'd been sitting back in the shadows, half-concealed by pine boughs. His back was against a jagged gray rock which protruded out of the ground. McGill held a six-gun steady on his right knee, the muzzle pointed at Matt's head.

"What did you see, Matt?" McGill asked.

He made no attempt to stand up, and the muzzle of the gun didn't waver a fraction of an inch.

Matt Kincaid stared at the gun, not liking the expression in McGill's eyes. A queer feeling stole through him. He remembered that he'd always liked McGill, and that the saloon keeper had a good reputation in Fort Scott.

"Now," Matt said, "you better put that gun down, Jack. It might go off."

"What did you see, Kincaid?" McGill asked him again.

"Two Gatling guns," Matt said truthfully, "trained on Avalanche Pass."

McGill's voice was steady, the words clipped. "What do you make of it, Kincaid?" he wanted to know. A terrible smile started to make its way across his face, and Matt Kincaid let his hand drop from the horse's neck.

He said slowly, "Jack, you're in with Cannivan on this."

Jack McGill nodded. He still sat on the log, making no attempt to get up.

Matt Kincaid blinked. He said dully, "Jack, there are women and children in that party. You know that."

"I do," McGill said.

Matt moistened his lips. "You're a damned fool, Jack," he stated.

The saloon keeper smiled. He said, "How long have I been running that saloon, Matt?"

"Longer than I've been at the post," Matt told him.

"Fourteen years," McGill said slowly, "picking up change, waiting to make my pile so that I could go East. That's a long time to be waiting, Matt."

"You think you can make it quick," Matt said, "but you'll have blood on your hands all the rest of your life, Jack, the blood of women and children."

McGill's eyes clouded for a brief moment. He said savagely, "Who asked these damned fools to come out here? They'll probably be slaughtered anyway before they reach the Powder."

"No," Matt said. "The road's clear all the way across. You know that, Jack. Rain Heart is too far away to give them any trouble."

"They'll have their trouble," Jack McGill stated. "I need those wagons, Kincaid."

"Where did Cannivan get those Gatlings?" Matt asked him. He needed time now—time to think.

"Brought them up from Junction City," McGill told him. "I think Cannivan has bigger plans with those guns."

"Plans to murder other wagon outfits going through," Matt grated, "and let the public believe the Indians are behind the damned business?" He said, "You're better than that, Jack."

"Not much," McGill smiled. "I'm only in on this one deal. Then I'm heading East."

Matt Kincaid smiled bitterly, "You don't think I'm going down to Elbow Bend to tell the emigrants they can move across the river."

"No," McGill said, "you're not going anywhere, Matt. We'll forge a note supposedly written by Colonel Harrison. We'll have one of Cannivan's men take it down to the camp. He'll be dressed in the uniform. They're so damned anxious to get across the river, they'll probably go even if they suspect something is wrong."

Matt lifted his right hand to the neck of the gray gelding. He was unarmed, and he knew now that McGill was going to kill him.

"You're making a mistake, Jack," he said. He shifted his position, moving back a step or two, letting his hand slide across the saddle and to the flank of the gray. He was still more than ten feet away from McGill—much too far to attempt a quick leap at the man.

"Now if you hadn't come out here," McGill told him, "you could be heading East this afternoon with a thousand dollars in your pockets and nothing on your conscience. It was easy money, Matt."

"I never meant to take it," Matt said slowly. "I wanted to see Cannivan's game."

McGill smiled, "I win a drink from Cannivan on that," he said. "I bet him you didn't have a price even after being kicked out of the service."

Matt Kincaid took another step backward, his hand still on the flank of the gray. The big gelding was facing toward McGill now as the small man sat on the log.

"You ready to die, Matt?" McGill asked.

"Ever meet anybody who was?" Matt countered. He looked straight at McGill and he started to twist his fingers into the flesh of the horse. He got a firm grip with his power-

ful fingers and he put every ounce of pressure into his hand, twisting the handful of horseflesh.

Startled, the gray snorted and leaped forward. Matt fell sideways behind the animal. He heard McGill's gun roar and he felt the breath of the lead. The gray went up into the air with the sound of the shot, and McGill scrambled out of the way to avoid the flying hoofs.

MATT came up on the right side of the horse, plunging in at McGill, reaching for the man's knees. The smaller man's gun barked again and the bullet creased the top of Matt's head as he smashed into McGill, knocking him backward. He got one hand on McGill's right wrist and twisted until the saloon keeper let his gun fall to the ground.

It was no fight after that. McGill was fully forty pounds lighter, and not strong physically. Matt hit him several times in the face with his fist and McGill lay still.

Scooping up the gun, Matt shoved it inside his belt. He picked McGill up as if he had been a sack of wheat and threw him across the front of the saddle.

From the direction of Avalanche Pass he heard the shouts and he knew that in another few moments Sipote would be coming through the woods to investigate.

With McGill lying across the saddle in front of him, Matt rode the gray through the woods at breakneck speed. He came out in the open ten minutes later and paused to listen. There were no sounds of pursuit.

Jack McGill was beginning to move as Matt dismounted and lifted the man from the saddle. He carried McGill to a fairly large tree, and then taking the tether rope from the saddle bound him to the tree, twisting the rope around his wrists so that he could not work himself loose.

McGill was shaking the fog out of his head as Matt rode away in the direction of Fort Scott. He was a mile from the tree where he'd tied McGill, and starting down the other side of a rise, when he saw the line of white wagons moving across the open plain, less than two miles from the Rimrock Hills and Avalanche Pass.

He pulled up, staring, white-faced. The big Conestogas moved slowly, seeming to crawl across the plain, the stock coming behind the last wagon. He knew immediately what had happened. Tim Cannivan had been unable to find him that morning, and the big trader had acted without hesitation, sending a fake trooper down with the message to the emigrants. The party had harnessed up immediately and made the crossing of the Paradise. That was the reason for the desperate haste on the part of Sipote and the Indians to get the two Gatlings lined up in the pass. They had known that the wagon outfit was but a short distance behind them.

Cannivan himself was probably now in the pass ready to direct the quick slaughter. It would be no fight. Several bursts from the Gatlings would put every able man in the Baker party out of commission—permanently.

Matt Kincaid whirled his horse and raced back toward the woods. He found McGill, conscious now, shaking his head, trying to work himself loose from the bonds. The saloon keeper was still when Matt leaped from the saddle.

He unbuckled McGill's gunbelt and rapidly refilled the Colt gun he'd taken from McGill. His eyes were hard.

"Jack, that wagon outfit is less than a mile from the pass now."

McGill didn't say anything. He watched as Matt Kincaid strapped the gunbelt around his own waist. He spoke then.

"You're crazy, Kincaid. If Cannivan ever turns that Gatling on you they'll never find the pieces."

"That might be," Matt told him. "I'll be damned proud to go out like that, Jack. You'll never be able to say that."

Jack McGill bit his lips. He looked across the plains.

Matt turned and raced the gelding through the woods, the gun in hand. He dismounted at the spot where McGill had intercepted him, and he made his way forward on foot toward the Gatling gun on the north slope of the pass.

Already, he could hear the rattle of wheels as the thirty wagons approached the entrance to the pass. One of the point riders was singing at the top of his voice. Matt heard a woman laugh, and then the shrill cries of children excited at being on the move again.

He saw the four men crouched behind the camouflaged Gatling gun. He recognized Louis Sipote's broad back just behind the crank. They were facing the pass silently.

Looking across the pass, he could not find the second gun, but he knew that Tim Cannivan was with that weapon, hidden among the shrub trees on the embankment.

Moving up cautiously, Matt got within fifteen feet of the four men. Two Arikaras were with Sipote, and one of the breeds. The breed's head was bandaged.

Matt stared at Sipote's back, knowing that he should put a bullet through it without even warning the man, but not liking to do it.

He said softly. "Louis."

Sipote whirled around, his right hand dropping to the Navy gun on his hip. Matt Kincaid shot the Frenchman through the body, draping him across the carriage of the Gatling.

He turned the Colt gun on the breed just as the man jerked a weapon from the holster. The

breed fell across Sipote's body, a slug through his neck. At the distance it was slaughter. The two Arikaras, dumbfounded, tried to sprint down the pass slope. Matt shot one of them; the other kept going, leaping like a mountain goat.

Wheeling, Matt ran back up the slope. Four horses had been tied among the trees here, and he loosened one of them. He rode rapidly along the top of the pass, shoving fresh cartridges into the cylinders as he rode. He kept riding until he broke out of the trees at the mouth of the pass and sprinted down toward the stalled wagon train. The point riders were huddled together, looking up the pass. They'd heard the shots and had stopped the train.

Matt slipped out of the saddle and approached an elderly, gray-haired man, stoop-shouldered, faded blue eyes. He'd seen George Baker, head of the party, at the encampment several times.

"What's going on up there?" Baker asked. "Indians?"

"Worse," Matt told him grimly. He explained briefly about the two Gatlings and saw Baker lose color. The old man looked back at the waiting wagons behind him, the women sitting up on the seats, watching from beneath sunbonnets, children climbing up and down from the wagons, shouting to each other.

"That's hard to believe," Baker said finally.

"Take a half dozen men," Matt told him, "and start working up toward the gun on the south side of the pass. See if you can draw their fire, but keep low and under cover. That gun can tear a man to pieces."

"What do you intend to do?" Baker asked curiously.

Matt Kincaid grinned coldly. "There's another gun on the opposite side of the pass," he said, "I figure on using that gun as soon as I can locate the position of the other one. They have it hidden in the brush."

The old man stared at him. "You want us to start up the hill here?" he asked.

"Start shooting," Matt advised him. "Shoot at anything, and then duck for cover. Stay down until I give you the signal to come up."

He raced back up the slope with the gray, disappearing among the trees. He was confident that Cannivan had not been able to see him from the opposite side of the pass and a quarter of a mile inside the cut, and though he, too, would wonder about the shooting, he might think it simply a preliminary skirmish with the wagon train, and not investigate too promptly.

He dismounted and crawled through the brush toward the Gatling, at the same time watching the opposite wall of the pass for the slightest movement. Crawling up to the gun, Matt rolled Louis Sipote and the breed away from it. He crouched behind the carriage and raised the sight until the central shaft was trained on the trees across the pass.

He saw a slight movement, and then a burst of red against the green of the trees. He was able to make out a figure, and then another one behind the screen of brush in front of the Gatling. He adjusted the barrels of his own weapon till it covered Cannivan's gun.

Stepping behind the gun, he gripped the crank handle and waited. He saw Tim Cannivan, himself, step out into the open and stare across the pass toward the second Gatling.

The big trader turned to shout at one of his men at the crank of the Gatling. The barrels

BULLET-BAIT DAMNYANKEE!

The bugles of the Civil War had sounded for the last time over the dead in blue and gray alike. So Mitch Atkins, late of the Fifth U. S. Cavalry, rode south to Texas, to find that rebel fighting men die hard, and to listen to the bullet rondelay they had written just for him:

HEAD BACK NORTH, DAKOTA MAN!

This stirring novel by Frank Bonham is only one of the full-blooded, action-packed Western stories on tap in the February Dime Western.

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of the gun started to move up the slope of the pass toward the spot where Matt was crouching.

Matt started to turn the crank handle then, very fast, holding it tightly. The Gatling roared and shook as streams of bullets darted from the eight barrels. The recoil was terrific, but Matt clung to the crank, spinning it around for fully a quarter of a minute, sending at least four hundred slugs across the pass.

He saw Tim Cannivan staggering like a crazy man, tearing at his chest, before he pitched forward and rolled down the slope. The second Gatling never got into action. The breed behind the crank was literally torn away from the gun, the top half of his body ripped by a dozen slugs. More lead richochetted off the Gatling, flying in all directions. Two more of Cannivan's men were gutted by the stream of lead. One of the Arikaras plunged away into the brush and Matt let him go.

Releasing his grip, he sat down on the ground, much of the strength gone from his body, a sickness stealing over him. He heard a bugle then, in the distance, and he stood up.

He shouted down to Baker and his men. "All clear."

HE WAS walking down the pass when he saw the column of riders in blue streaming in from the east. He recognized tall, taciturn Lieutenant Farnham, of Troop C, at the head. The guidon fluttered from the tall pole in the guidon corporal's stirrup socket. Matt Kincaid looked at it. He saw Lieutenant Farnham stop to talk with George Baker, the anger in the lieutenant's eyes.

Baker was taking a slip of paper from his pocket, handing it to the lieutenant, when Matt came up.

"This gent," Baker explained, nodding toward Matt, "saved every one of us from bein' shot to pieces. You hear them Gatlings goin' off, Lieutenant."

Farnham stared at Matt and nodded.

"Corporal—ah—ex-Corporal Kincaid," he said. "Can you explain this note which was delivered to Mr. Baker and supposedly written by the colonel?"

"Tim Cannivan was behind it, sir," Matt told him. He started to lift his hand in salute and then dropped it. He saw the enlisted men watching him. He'd had many friends in Troop C.

"Cannivan," Farnham murmured. "You say he's dead?"

"He won't have any use for those Gatlings," Matt stated.

Lieutenant Farnham nodded. "I'm sure the colonel would like to hear the story, Kincaid. Would you accompany us?"

"I have another man tied to a tree back in the woods," Matt said. "He was in with Cannivan on this deal."

"We'll pick him up on the way back," Farnham said. "Fall in, Corporal—ah—Mr. Kincaid."

They came up behind Jack McGill and Matt dismounted. McGill had been standing up when Matt left him. He was sitting down now —staring across the vast expanse of open plain. The ropes had been loosened from his wrists and arms, but McGill made no attempt to get up.

Lieutenant Farnham came around to the front of him. He looked at Matt Kincaid and said quietly, "Suicide, Mr. Kincaid?"

Matt nodded slowly. McGill was holding a small derringer in his right hand. There was a hole in his right temple. He was looking across the plains, but he would never see again.

"Reckon he had that gun on him," Matt muttered. "I didn't have time to search him, Lieutenant."

An hour later Matt Kincaid stood before Colonel Harrison, telling the story from the beginning. Major Andrew Phillips was present, along with Captains McLain and Ferris. They were listening intently.

When he'd finished Colonel Harrison picked up a pencil on his desk.

He said to Matt, "How long were you in the service, Kincaid, before the—the unfortunate affair of last week?"

"Fourteen years," Matt told him.

Major Phillips said tersely, "Lieutenant Addison was a damned prig, Colonel. I'm glad he wasn't assigned to us."

Matt Kincaid blinked. Lieutenant Addison was the shavetail he'd knocked down in McGill's saloon.

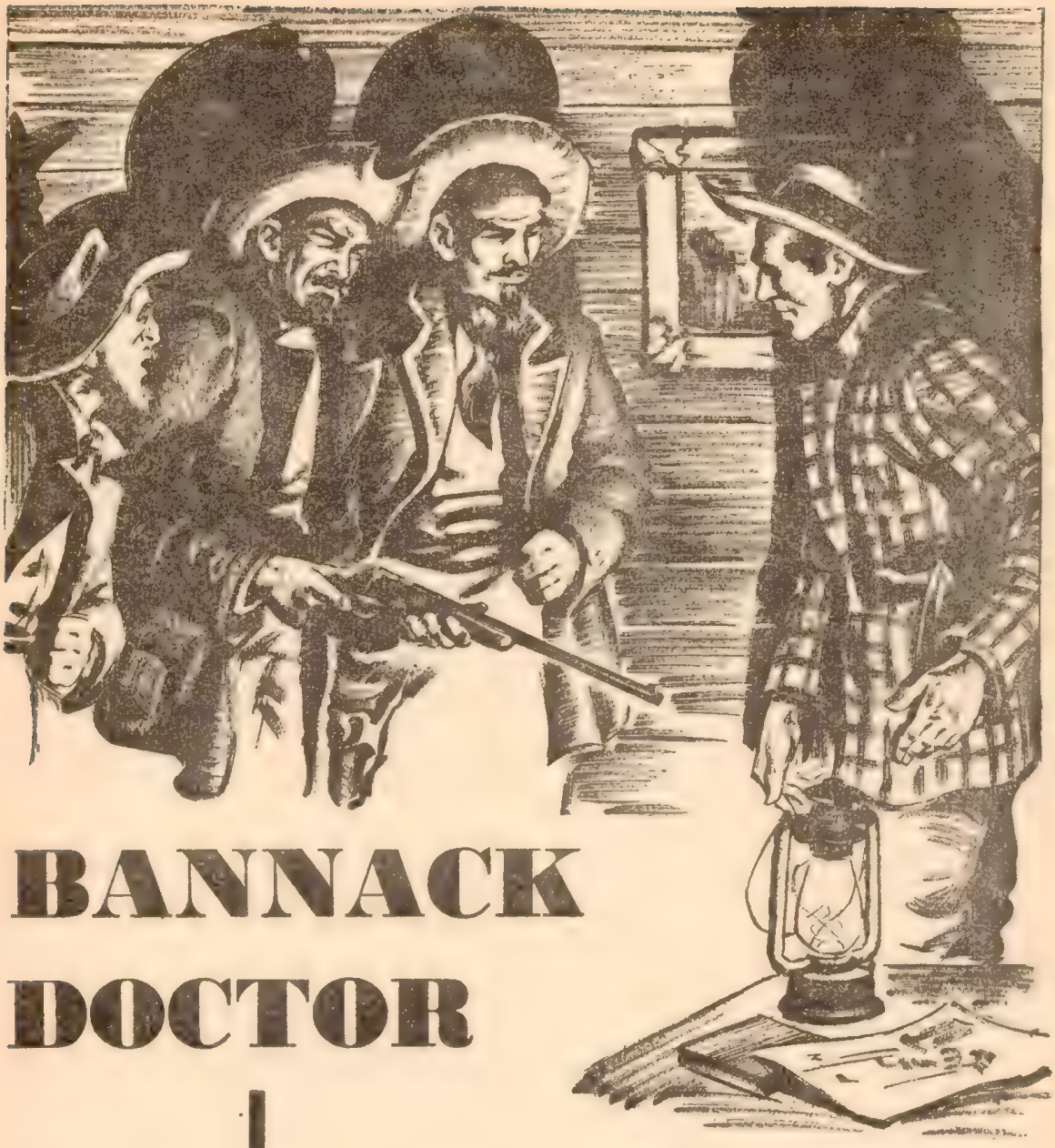
Colonel Harrison permitted a faint smile to slide across his face. He said, "Kincaid, you have done us an invaluable service. No single man on the frontier, white or red, has caused the Army as much trouble as Timothy Cannivan. Your unique method of disposing of the case meets with our unanimous approval." He was looking out the window when he finished. "Under the circumstances, Kincaid," he added, "I'm sure the United States Army would consider your reenlistment."

Matt Kincaid opened his mouth and then closed it. Major Phillips told him gravely, "I believe you are dismissed, Kincaid. Good luck."

Matt stumbled out of the building and started across the parade grounds toward the adjutant's office. He nearly walked into a horse being led across the grounds by a rookie trooper.

The enlisted man said, "What the hell, mister!"

Matt Kincaid said to the horse. "Excuse me, friend," and walked on—on air!



BANNACK DOCTOR

Breen moved the shotgun. "Better change your mind, doc. . . ."

The badman offered a bullet, the lawman a rope, as they bid for the soul of a renegade doctor who had one life to give—and that not his own!

I

By NORMAN A. FOX

ALWAYS the thing that had amazed Jason Weir was the swiftness with which news traveled in this wilderness that was Montana. Today the excitement had seeped into Bannack, destroying the Sabbath's comparative calm and giving men a studied alertness and a grim intensity. It had sent Jason out of Grissman's Store in mid-afternoon, the blandishments of the wood stove in that favorite gathering place turned sour by the intrusion of a reality that was no concern of his. Let others worry about road agent and vigilante and guess where the ax would fall.

And so he trudged toward his cabin on the camp's outskirts, a young man if you only counted the years, a tall man when his shoulders were straightened; and January's snow, hard-packed, crunched beneath his boots, speaking of cold, speaking of loneliness, speaking of exile unending.

Around him the camp sprawled, sod-roofed cabin and gaunt frame shoulder to shoulder, the hasty habitations of the Argonauts crowding to Grasshopper Creek. A year ago, when Jason had first looked upon this hurly-burly, Bannack had scarcely had its inception; the flotsam of forlorn hopes, the debris of blasted dreams had just begun to backwash northward, a wave of emigration that had once made of Pike's Peak a beacon and found only disappointment in California's golden sands. Bannack had swelled and ebbed; last summer Jason had witnessed an exodus to Alder Gulch, eighty miles to the east, to the greater gold strike that had reared chaotic Virginia City almost overnight. Now, with 1864 less than a dozen days old, Jason wondered what another year would bring, and found the thought strange. A man given to looking backward, he had looked ahead for an instant.

He shrugged this fancy aside, his tireless stride unbroken; and when he came to his cabin on Yankee Flat, he saw the trampled snow before the doorway, and this gave him pause, but only for an instant. Bannack's alarm had become a contagion, but he'd kept immune. The terror that rode this land, manifesting itself in robbed stage coaches and murdered wayfarers and hinting at an organization far from haphazard, had left him untouched. What interest could the road agent band have in a man who panned only enough gold to provide himself with food and tobacco plus a change of clothes in the season when the Mormon freighters fetched wares from distant Salt Lake? So thinking, he swung the door inward and found three men who were awaiting him.

They were big enough to crowd the single, puncheon floored room, and one of them he knew by name: Marty Breen, late of the Oro Fino diggings and given to much roistering in Virginia City's hurdy-gurdy houses, those roaring dance halls with the obvious sidelines. The three wore mustaches and goatees in the style that Buffalo Bill Cody was to make famous, and all wore their neckerchiefs tied in a sailor's flat knot. Their heavy coats, thrown open, revealed Navy Colts at their belts, and Breen carried a sawed-off ten-gauge shotgun in the crook of his arm. By armament and insignia, they were of the road agent band, if rumor had it right, but Jason's lean face stayed rigid at the sight of them.

He merely said, "Well, gentlemen?"

Breen shuffled his big feet. "We've heard tell that you're a doctor, Weir."

Jason shrugged, looking down at his worn boots, his homespun trousers, his flannel shirt —garb as rough as their own. "It's no secret that I once practiced," he said. "Back in the States. I'm a prospector now, sir. You'd better get Dr. Glick."

"Glick's made himself hard to find today," Breen said. "Where's your black bag, doc? We've got a horse ready for you."

This imperativeness put a great distaste in Jason, and he said, "I make it a point to mind my own business. I've no interest in your troubles."

Breen moved the shotgun, a movement almost imperceptible but tremendously eloquent, and said, "Better change your mind, doc."

Jason shrugged again. "I promised to stop in at the Webb cabin this afternoon. The little girl is sick. I'll have to do that before I leave."

He watched their exchange of glances and would have placed his bet that there'd be a refusal, but Breen said thoughtfully, "Cora's safe. Cora wouldn't talk," and the familiarity with which he used the name tightened Jason's jaw, but some of the tension went out of the pair who'd stood silently listening.

JASON put his back to them, quit the cabin and went through the snow to the slope of the hill beyond Yankee Flat to where a tiny well-chinked cabin perched. When he raised his knuckles to the door, Cora Webb opened it and said breathlessly, "I saw you coming through the window. She's worse, Jason."

Cora was a tall woman, and a plentitude of petticoats could not conceal her lissome grace— no more than the shadow of worry could dim a beauty that to Jason Weir was like a flame in the wilderness. He had come here often as a neighbor, making this one exception to his rule of aloofness; and he moved now to the robe-covered bunk where a girl, a blue-eyed six-year-old miniature of her mother, lay writhing.

Jason bent his browned face close to the child and said, "Where does it hurt, Sue?"

"My tummy," the child cried. "It's like knives sticking in me."

His hand explored gently, and his face was graver when he faced Cora. "Luke in town?" he asked.

She brushed a wisp of brown hair from her forehead. "Henry Plummer sent him to Virginia City again. Some business for the sheriff. Jason, she's—she's bad?"

He didn't answer, and that was answer enough. "I've got to leave camp for a while," he said. "If her fever gets worse, you'd better find Dr. Glick."

She followed him to the door and laid a hand upon his arm; and when he looked into

her eyes, it was like being free again; and it would have been easy to forget that she was Luke Webb's wife. He'd told himself he came here only because of the child, but the deception was never thinner than at this moment. Cora's fingers held him, and she said, "You're good medicine for Sue. She trusts you, and that's half the cure. Couldn't you come back, Jason?"

An ancient pain turned his face bleaker. "She wouldn't be safe in my hands. Not under a knife, if it comes to that. Get Dr. Glick, Cora."

He left then, following his own footprints back to his cabin; and when he shouldered inside, the three still awaited him. Marty Breen scowled and said, "You could have stepped livelier, doc. Time counts with a gunshot wound."

Jason got down to his knees beside his bunk and delved under it for his bag. "I'm ready," he said.

They walked to the horses; the animals stood back in the concealment of the brittle willows fringing Grasshopper Creek, and he was surprised to find that the mount for him was a rangy American horse, tall by contrast to the Indian cayuses and California bronchos commonly used in the section. A certain George Ives had ridden such a horse as this, but Ives had been tried and hanged for murder in distant Nevada City about three weeks before; and thereafter the whisper had started of an organization, the vigilantes, that would meet the road agents' ruthlessness with a greater ruthlessness.

The saddle leather was so cold that Jason winced as he mounted. There was no gauging the temperature, but this was the bitterest weather of a bitter winter, holding consistently from twenty to forty degrees below zero since New Year's Day. The three pocketing him as the horses instinctively bunched together, Jason involuntarily looked back to Bannack and wondered if a bullet, insuring secrecy, would be his fee for this day's work. That would be irony for you—subjecting himself to this cold ride in order to die! He wondered then why he'd not long since thrown away the black bag that was his single bridge to the past; and he wondered, too, if there could be any real escaping from reality as long as he possessed it.

The ride was like something remembered from a nightmare when the blankets get kicked aside and cold seeps through the cabin's chinking and desolation haunts all dreaming. There was an endlessness of alder thickets and snow and the steaming breath of horses and men. The chill wind whined a threnody through the brush; branches crackled with metallic sharpness to its passage. Jason judged that they were less than four miles out of Bannack when he smelled wood smoke and saw the thin, wavering lift of it. They had never been far from Grasshopper Creek, and now they looped back to its frozen rim and found a camp of sorts. Three more men, flailing their arms and stamping their feet when their restless pacing took them away from the fire, stiffened to alertness. The fourth man lay upon the ground, blanket-wrapped and shapeless.

Marty Breen swore a long and savage oath and said, "So he's a goner, eh? Doc, I told you to step livelier!"

Jason came stiffly from his saddle and peeled back the blanket and had his look at the bearded face, and that was all that was needed. He had two thoughts then; the first was that Sue Webb was half an orphan now; and the second that it was better this way, for these were indeed road agents. The third was merely in passing—he understood now why he'd been allowed to stop at the Webb cabin.

The surprise came when he lifted his eyes to a man who approached him, one of the three who'd been waiting here. For that man was Bannack's choice for sheriff of the district—Henry Plummer.

He knew Plummer, of course. Every prospector in the diggings knew this slender, graceful man, so meticulous of dress and person, so eternally gracious. Popular vote had put the law in Plummer's affable hands; and if, of late, rumor had cast a shadow across his name, most people had laughed at the suggestion that Plummer was affiliated with the road agents. Yet Plummer's very presence here was the damning proof that rumor had not lied; and Jason, suddenly conscious of the knowledge now his, felt a stiffness between his shoulderblades and a dryness in his mouth.

Plummer said, "You seem to have had a cold ride for nothing, doctor. What is your fee?"

In a whiskered era, Plummer kept himself clean-shaven except for a neatly trimmed brown mustache, and on his face today lay the first real shadow of worry. Looking at him, Jason thought of Lucifer fallen. But in Plummer's question there was a half-promise of safe return; and this, too, was surprising and left Jason without answer. His fee? How did a man charge for his services in a country where a newspaper fetched two dollars in gold dust and a cat was worth a hundred dollars to those who had need for one?

He said, "Whatever you think my time's worth."

Plummer put a buckskin poke in Jason's stiffened hand, and Jason pocketed this without looking at it. He got laboriously to his feet, his body clamoring to move nearer to the fire but his churning mind telling him to climb onto the horse and head away from here. He

made it to the saddle, and the stabbing cold was welcome now, but Plummer put a hand to the saddle-horn and smiled up at Jason.

"Leave the horse at the Bannack Hotel," Plummer said. "There'll be no questions asked. It has been obvious to me that you are a man of education and refinement, doctor. And of discretion, too, I trust. Discreet enough to realize that the dust I've given you will more than pay your fare out of these diggings. One of Oliver's coaches may be leaving for Virginia City tonight. Be on it, doctor."

HERE was the threat, silk-gloved but like the bite of steel, and Jason remembered Grissman's Store and his leaving it today because he had no interest in talk of road agent and vigilante, and it was his bitter reflection that he'd chosen a poor way to escape the intrusion of reality.

He said stiffly, "Can't you believe that your affairs are no concern of mine?"

Marty Breen, dismounted and hovering near the fire, again shifted his shotgun. A swift savagery in his eyes, he said, "Are you fool enough to put your trust in him, Plummer? There are cheaper ways of buying a closed mouth."

Plummer said, "Shut up, Marty! We may all be running before the night's over. This is an affair between gentlemen. Doctor, be gone from Bannack tonight."

Whereupon Jason Weir, reading death in a man's eyes, brought the horse around and prodded it to a gallop. The brush rattled as he forced through it, and he held to a hard pace until he saw the lights of Bannack through the early dusk. The horse was taken from him at the Bannack Hotel by a surly-eyed man with a sailor's flat knot in his neckerchief, and, the mount led off into the gathering gloom, Jason had a quick drink at Percy & Hacker's saloon to take the chill out of him; and when he left the place, there was no conscious prompting of his footsteps, but they brought him to the Bannack office of A. J. Oliver & Company. The office was closed, but he found a man at the stables.

"No stage out tonight," Jason was told. "Schedule's all snarled on account of a holdup this side of Virginia."

"A holdup? Anybody hurt?"

"The driver got nicked. But the shotgun guard brought back word he nailed one road agent neat."

To Jason came the quick memory of Luke Webb's stiffened face, and he knew now how the man had come by his wound and why Webb hadn't been fetched into Bannack. He said, "Any chance of getting out of here tonight?"

"Some miners are taking a wagon through to Virginia. They'd give you a lift. Better be at the hotel no later than nine."

Nodding, Jason turned toward his cabin, drawing his coat closer about him, for the temperature had dropped with sundown. Again the hard-packed snow crunched beneath his feet, speaking of cold, speaking of loneliness and endless exile; and his first rebellion grew with that walk. He was used to putting his back to places; in a sense he'd been running ever since he'd come West, and Plummer's order had merely set the wheels in motion again. He'd long since ceased fighting against destiny, had Jason Weir; yet if a man was to be an exile, the place of his banishment should be of his own choosing.

Such was the run of his thoughts as he neared the cabin; but before he put his hand to the door, he knew he'd be catching that wagon out of Bannack at nine. After all, what was the difference between one camp and another? And what would be the gain in risking road agent wrath for a principle? He'd had principles once, and they hadn't saved him.

Then he was in the cabin, and again he found someone awaiting him, sitting here in the darkness and the silence and the cold—a short sturdy man, broad of shoulder and slow of speech. This man said bluntly, "You had visitors this afternoon, Weir. Three of 'em. I could give you their names, likely. You rode away with 'em. Where? And for what reason?"

Some spark of that momentary rebellion still burned, and from it flared a new flame, born of weariness and a sense that all the world was closing in on him. This feeling gave truculence to Jason's tone as he said, "And why should I answer?"

"You're a doctor," the little man said. "You don't work at it often, but we think you worked at it today. A man stopped a bullet in a holdup out of Virginia City the other night. We want the name of that man. And the names of any of his friends you happened to meet."

Jason said, "So you're one of those vigilantes the whole camp's talking about. You don't need my help. The whisper is going around that your stranglers caught Red Yeager, the messenger of the road agents, and George Brown, their corresponding secretary, and hanged the pair of them at Laurin's ranch on the Stinking Water. Talk has it that Yeager named the whole band before he died. Isn't that right?"

"In this business we want to be sure—very sure. We haven't hanged an innocent man yet. Did you look at a gunshot wound today, doc?"

"And if I won't answer?"

A faint stirring of this strange visitor in the gloom—a stirring that might have been a

shrug. "We've got a thankless job to do. But we'll have to remember that them that ain't for us is ag'in us. How do you stand?"

"I stand on neither side," Jason said, his voice a whiplash. "Can't any of you get that through your heads? All I've wanted here is the privilege of panning a little color—and of being left alone. Now get out; I've got things to do. If it makes you any happier, you can report that the man I attended was dead when I reached him. There's one new rope you won't have to spoil!"

THE MAN came wordlessly to his feet and made his departure; and Jason stood waiting until the sound of boots, crunching in the snow, had faded away. Lighting a lamp, he stirred up a fire and began throwing his possessions into a trunk; and he was mindful that the time might be growing short, when he again heard footfalls. He got the door open, and Cora staggered inside, a shawl drawn tightly about her. She had never come here before; and in the first moment of surprise he could only say, incongruously, "You should have worn a coat. It's a bitter night."

"I ran," she said, and her voice told him how close to hysteria she was. "I ran all the way. Jason, she's worse—lots worse. You've got to come quickly."

The lamplight was not kind to her face; it made her drawn and haggard, and he wondered how long she'd been without sleep.

"I told you to get Dr. Glick," he said.

"He's not at his cabin. Jason, there's something wrong in town tonight. Choir practice was called off, and some of the women say the order's gone out that they're to stay in their homes tonight. The vigilantes are up to something. Maybe Dr. Glick is with them. You've got to go with me."

He almost laughed; but there was no humor in him, nor any emotion, but only the ancient pain and the feeling that destiny had woven this web and allowed for no escaping. Go to Cora's cabin and attend a sick child? Go, when Henry Plummer and his road agent band would consider this disobedience of their order as a challenge and a threat? Go, and thereby miss that wagon to Virginia City and seal his own death? Yet he knew that more than this tied his hands—that bowing to her wish would be crossing the bridge to the yesterdays.

But he knew no words to tell her that her faith was misplaced. How could he explain all this to a woman who looked at him with harassed eyes, a mother's wild fear in her? A woman who would still have to be told of her husband?

He said, "I have to leave Bannack tonight. But it wouldn't matter anyway. I'm no doctor. Not any more. I told you today she wouldn't be safe in my hands."

Cora said, "Sue's been calling only one name. Not mine. No, nor her father's. Yours, Jason."

He said then, frantically, "Hear me out. There were two men and a woman, once; that's an old story, as old as the Bible. I was one of those men, the other was my best friend, and he was the one the woman chose. I know how to be a good loser—then. But one night he had to have an emergency operation, and mine was the name he called, too. I performed that operation, and he died under my knife. That was when the whispering started. David and Uriah. Maybe you don't know what whispering can do in a small city. They said foul and savage things, and the din of them got into my ears whenever I took up a scalpel. There came a time when I wondered if maybe they were telling the truth—that my mind had willed one thing and my heart another that night. It finished me. That's why you find me in Bannack, panning enough color to survive. That's why I've lived aloof. And that's why Sue wouldn't be safe with me."

It seemed to him that she'd grown taller while he talked and that the fear was gone from her eyes, but he didn't like the thing that had taken its place. She said, "So that's your story! That's why you threw away a fine skill and a fine future. Because you made one mistake—the mistake of running. My story's simpler, Jason. It has to do with only two people—a girl who tired of a bound-girl's life on an Ohio farm, and a man named Luke Webb who talked wealth and had the romance of the West about him. I married Luke, and I've lived with that mistake for eight years. Do you know how many times I was tempted to take Sue and start running, too?"

So she knew at least a part of it.

He said, "This makes one thing easier to tell you. Luke died today."

"I know," she said. "Marty Breen stopped off at the cabin and told me. I can guess how Luke died. I haven't been altogether blind. But it's not Luke I'm thinking about tonight. It's Sue."

Her hand came from beneath the shawl, and a dragoon pistol that must have once belonged to Luke Webb, road agent, looked ponderous in her tiny fist. "I carried this tonight, not knowing what might be abroad in Bannack. I didn't think I'd need it beyond your doorstep. You'll have to go with me, Jason. I fight for what I love."

HE STARED at the gun in her hand, but it was not the weapon that moved him. The gun was part of it, but the rest was her; and he found it odd that in this instant he should at long last realize why he'd never thrown his black bag away. There was to have been a day when he would need the bridge to

what he'd once been. There was an inevitability to all this that was more commanding than Marty Breen's shotgun, more compelling than a vigilante's wish.

He was smiling as he reached for his coat and draped it about her shoulders. "You can put the gun away," he said. "A man can learn many things from a woman. I didn't suppose that courage was one of them."

For a moment he thought she was going to faint; but when he moved to steady her, she took his arm. And so they went out into the bitter night together, the ominous night with its strange stirrings and its unspoken secrets; and they came to the cabin beyond Yankee Flat and to the side of the child who lay moaning. Jason made another examination and said afterwards, "It's what I feared when I told you to fetch Glick. An inflammation that's led to infection. Peritonitis. There's no choice now but to operate."

Cora faltered, then steadied herself. "Here?"

"Too risky to move her. You can help me. You've got water boiling on the stove, I see. Good. Bring it to a boil and take all the instruments out of my bag and drop them into the water. Then rustle up all the lamps in the place, and all the candles, too. And clear that table. We'll have to use it."

He was all medico now; he knew this woman's courage—he had borrowed from it tonight—but he also knew it was best to give her things to busy her hands and mind. The table was cleared and scrubbed, he lifted Sue from her bed to the table top and prepared her for the operation. The child watched him in silence, listless, no longer moaning; and shortly Jason said, "Cora, fetch the flask from my bag. Yes, that one. It's chloroform. We'll have to fashion our own means of administering it, but thank heavens I've enough."

And now a lamp and candles were clustered about the table, perched upon boxes and chairs; and Cora was standing by, another lamp held high; and the fireplace threw its lurid glow on log walls and slabbed floor. Jason frowned; the vapors of the chloroform, exposed to the flames of the lamps, would produce a choking gas; but he had to have light. Therefore he had to perform this operation quickly. He'd scrubbed himself, and when the chloroform had done its work, he stood with scalpel poised. And it was in this breathless moment that he had the fleeting thought that there was still time to catch the wagon at the Bannack Hotel. He looked at Cora across the table; their eyes locked and held, and Jason placed his hand on the swollen abdomen of the child and carefully began to make what he considered a sufficient incision.

After that the silence closed in, the strained, endless, nerve-wracking silence, broken only by his occasional requests for instruments, each request couched in words Cora would understand. Time ran on, and at first Jason feared his own clumsiness, and that put the sweat in his eyes. But this was an old and familiar performance, and heart and hand and mind were one with him tonight, and the surety came back with each motion. Once the child began to twitch, and Jason's hasty command fetched more chloroform. Then, at long last, came the time when the call was for the needle. And afterwards Jason moved back from the table and gently took the lamp from Cora's hand and placed it upon a bench.

"We'll cover her and let her lie where she is. She'll be coming out of the chloroform soon," he said.

"She's going to be well, Jason?"

Her wan, strained face, he supposed, was a reflection of his own; he felt unutterably weary of body, and yet a strange new strength was in him too, a strength of spirit. Smiling, he said, "She's in God's hands now, but he will treat her kindly, I know. We've done all we can do. There is nothing more to worry about, Cora."

And somewhere in his own words, he found the taste of irony. Nothing to worry about? Nothing but the fact that it must be well after nine o'clock and a wagon had departed from Bannack and Henry Plummer's band would have learned that Dr. Jason Weir had not been aboard that wagon. Nothing to worry about except that the hour was coming when he'd have to pay the price for his choice tonight. But he'd known that all along and the price had made no real difference. The price of running from reality was greater, he had discovered, for that price stripped a man of principle and took from him the work that his hands were meant to do.

And in the midst of his thought, he heard the footsteps, the wild and floundering footsteps, the footsteps of a man lurching frantically through the snow. There was no knock; the door banged inward and Marty Breen stood there, his hair tousled and his eyes aflame and his shotgun held in readiness. He said, "Thought you'd be here, doc, when you weren't at your cabin. So you sold us out!"

Jason's glance went quickly to the child. "Close that door, you confounded fool!" he snapped.

"Worry about your own skin, doc!" Breen said savagely. "The game's up here, but I'll leave you dead before I run. The vigilantes struck tonight. Got Henry Plummer asleep; and they got his deputies, Stinson and Ray, too. Hung all three of them on the gallows at the edge of camp. Now they'll be hunting down the rest of us. You peached, damn you! And I'll drag you to hell for it!"

The man was mad with fear and anger—and there could be no making him believe

that somebody else had named Plummer's crew and brought Plummer to such an end. There could be no stopping that leveling shotgun, no dodging the charge of buckshot that would pour from it. Jason couldn't even raise his hands in protest; he felt too weary for that, and too proud to beg, now that he had learned, again, the way that a man walked. And then he heard the gun go off. Not the shotgun. The shotgun was slipping from Breen's fingers and falling to the puncheon floor, and Breen had been slammed backward out through the doorway and into the snow by the force of a bullet.

Turning, Jason saw Cora; and he saw her gun again. . . .

He got through the doorway and bent over Breen and had a look. He raised his eyes when he heard the ringing beat of boots through the snow.

Jason got back into the cabin and closed the door and said, "You only wounded Breen, and that leaves the real job to a vigilante rope." And the lie tasted clean, for it would save her harsh nights of remembrance.

Again he thought she was going to faint; she reeled toward him, and he got his arms around her neck and took the gun from her hand. She said weakly, "Remember that man —back East—the one who died on your operating table? You lost a life, but you gave one back tonight—and almost at the cost of your own. Does that square things with yourself, Jason?"

But he was only remembering that once she had said, *"I fight for what I love—"* Remembering that and Marty Breen dead by her hand, and Luke Webb dead, too, and the warmth of her against him. He knew now that there was an inevitability about this, too; sooner or later there was to have been this hour when he would open his arms and she would come into them.

Outside, he could hear the movement of many men, the dragging sound of a body being hauled away; and just for an instant a face was framed at the cabin window, the face of a short and sturdy man, broad of shoulder and slow of speech. This man looked from Jason's eyes to Jason's hand that still held the gun; and the face was gone. But that brief glance told Jason that the man now knew how Dr. Jason Weir stood and would always stand—a man who had never lost his principles, though he had seemingly mislaid them.

Boots crunched in the snow again, the sound diminishing until it was lost in an immensity of silence; and there was only the room and the night and the sleeping child and the woman held close in his arms.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 27)

1. True. According to the Westerner's definition, a white-faced cow and an open-faced cow are the same thing.

2. A wheel horse is the animal at the rear of a jerk-line string.

3. False. "Shove down" is a term applied to moving cattle down from the high mountain ranges to lower ground for the winter months.

4. A shotgun wagon is a roundup wagon sent out by "independents"—in disregard for the roundup of other outfits.

5. When a man is "put to bed with a pick and shovel," he is dead and buried.

6. A "pumpkin seed saddle" is a very small saddle.

7. False. A "night horse" is an animal which has been picketed so that it can be readily caught for purposes of night riding.

8. If a cowpuncher told you he had "no medicine," he would mean he had no information on the topic under discussion.

9. When a horse is "Indian shod," it is shod with rawhide. The rawhide is placed on the hoof and allowed to dry, and forms a durable covering.

10. "Inner circle" refers to the inside circle on roundup.

11. "Eating drag dust" can mean that an individual is riding in the dust kicked up by a trail herd, or "eating humble pie."

12. No. According to the Western definition, a "fan-tail" is a wild horse.

13. A "cow bunny" is the wife or sweetheart of a cattleman or other Westerner.

14. "Cow grease" is slang for butter.

15. "California moccasins" would most likely be worn in extremely cold weather. The cowpuncher applies this term to burlap sacks which he wraps around his feet in order to keep them from freezing.

16. A "cake wagon" generally carries cottonseed-meal cake. Such a wagon is more or less a modern innovation. The cottonseed cake, of course, is used for livestock feed.

17. A brace game is a gambling game in which matters are fixed in advance so that the dealer or house automatically wins.

18. According to the Western interpretation, the Spanish word, *bosque,* means any group of trees.

19. Some Westerners refer to the saddle horn as the "apple."

20. "Airtights" is the cowpuncher slang term for "canned goods."

LAW OF THE

After we hanged his father for rustling, Tap Latham was the last man our range ever expected to see again—and he stayed long enough to prove it!

IT WAS late that fall when Tap Latham came to Pine Top. I opened the door to see him standing there on the kitchen veranda, tall and lean and keen, holding his black hat in his hands. Behind him lay the full sweep of our valley, sage-dotted and broken by pine-clad hills and, far off to the west, hanging like craggy storm clouds above the rim, the tremendous snow-capped mass of the Rockies took the morning light.

"Howdy," he said with some reserve. "You got a job for a good rope hand?"

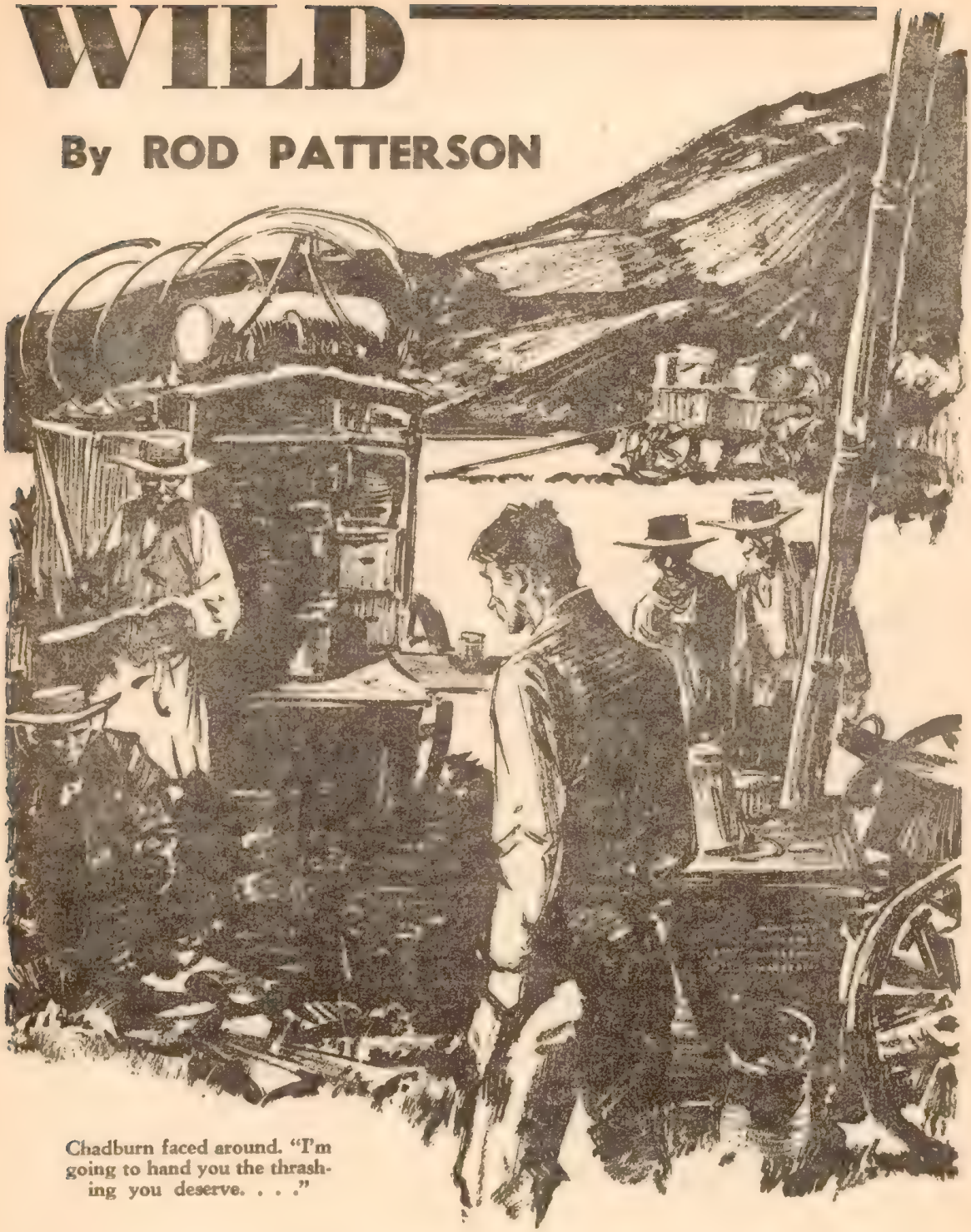
I was all for him from that moment on, because he had asked *me* as though I was the head of the house, for a boy squirming up into his teens is full of self-important thoughts.

"Why, shore," I told him in my deepest tone. "Jest put your horse in the starve-out, and I'll see about gittin' some dinner rustled up for you."

"Hold on!" It was my father, who had come into the kitchen behind me as I spoke. He put a big hand gently on my shoulder and pulled me back out of the door. The sun was in his

WILD

By ROD PATTERSON



Chadburn faced around. "I'm going to hand you the thrashing you deserve. . . ."

eyes, and he had to squint at the stranger's face. But then he said in a surprised voice, "Well, if it ain't Tap Latham! Never expected to see you back in this neck of the woods again! Where's your father?"

"Dead," Latham said flatly. "I buried him myself down Hassayampa way, two months ago." He had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, but they were a hard blue, and very bitter. "I need work, Mister Bascom," he went on in his dry voice. "I know this country and I know you need extry hands with a roundup goin' on."

"Yes, that's true," my father said. Then he looked the fellow up and down and met his eyes again and held them, saying bluntly, "But

folks 'round here won't be exactly glad to hear you've drifted back. They ran your father and brother off this range for rustlin'. What about your brother Hack?"

"Far as I'm concerned," Latham said coolly, "he can be dead, too. I ain't his keeper and I'm shet of Hack for good. I came back to claim the homestead on Fiddler's Ford and I want it bad, even if I got to work for wages for a while to pay the back taxes on it."

My father cleared his throat. "All right. Take your cayuse down to the stable and grain him. We'll have dinner in about an hour."

"Thanks," Latham answered feelingly, and I saw how his hands shook as he pulled his buck gloves off and stuck them under his heavy cartridge belt.

As he walked toward his horse in the dooryard, my father called, "I'll remind you to watch your language in this house, with my wife and daughter—"

Latham walked on as though he hadn't heard, and my father closed the door and we both saw my mother and sister, Milly, standing there with anxious expressions of indignation. "Did you have to say that to him?" my mother asked severely, her dark eyes snapping.

"Jest wanted him to know we're a Christian fam'ly," father said defensively. Right away he added, "But he's been cut deep by that ruckus his father and brother had. It's a cryin' shame—"

Milly said, "You should've told him to move—after dinner, anyway! It isn't fair to him to keep him here where he'll have to face people who hate him!"

My father shook his head solemnly. "If he's any good, he'll stick it. Only one thing worries me—a man without fam'ly pride don't git very far in this country!"

"Why," my mother asked gently, "did you hire him, then?"

"Because I aim to see Tap Latham gits his chance to show what he's made of," my father said.

What I had heard about the Lathams came back to my mind as I watched and listened. They had operated a two-bit cow spread, some ten miles from our ranch, and Oatley Latham and his eldest son, Hack, had shot it out with a posse of ranchers, and then had skipped out of the valley. For some reason, though he had not been involved with them in the rustling, Tap Latham had vanished, too. But now he had come back, and the drama and mystery of his return made the short hairs crawl at the nape of my neck.

I heard Milly, who was nineteen and smart as well as pretty, arguing with father. "But he'll be a marked man, and they'll hound him crazy! How are you going to explain to the Parkers and the Langhorns—and to Bob Chadburn?"

I SAW Milly blush to the roots of her auburn hair. She and Chadburn were engaged to be married. My mother had told me the wedding would happen the day of the roundup jamboree, which was only ten days off. Anyway, I liked Bob Chadburn a lot because he treated me with more respect than most people.

I left the house and went down to the stables, eager to get better acquainted with so mysterious and dangerous a man as Tap Latham of Fiddler's Ford. I found him rubbing down his pony with a burlap sack. He saw me saunter in and nodded perfunctorily. His tallness and thinness seemed more marked indoors and, though his shoulders were wide and muscular, his hands were slender as a woman's. I saw the dull, hard shine of his revolver in its holster and was impressed by what I thought might be notches on its black bone butt. Later I discovered they were his initials.

I said, frankly, "Your face is dug-in, like you ain't et for a month."

He looked me over with his quiet, cold eyes. "You ain't much wider'n a sulphur stick yourself," he said. "Is that dirt or freckles on your face?"

I didn't care for his bantering tone, but chose to ignore it. I fished a plug of tobacco out and offered it on extended hand. "Chaw?"

He took it and looked it over gravely, then stared at me blankly. "Thanks," he said and bit tobacco off and passed the plug back, his cheek distended out of shape.

"*I* don't chew," I informed him hastily. "Jest carry it, case I git a toothache. Terbaccer's good fer toothache."

He turned to put his pony in a stall, and I saw him throw his chew under the horse's hoofs. I felt relief, because I knew mother and Milly would never tolerate a man who chewed.

"Mebbe," Latham said over his shoulder, "you *will* chew—when you git all your teeth."

He was laughing and anger was like a sour taste in my mouth, though I was still too much impressed by the six-gun to make a retort.

And so Tap Latham, the lone wolf, came into our lives at Pine Top Ranch as easily, as casually, as that. But before it came time for him to leave, I was not the only one in the valley that fervently wished he had never come at all.

There were five of us around the table at dinner that noon. The crew had eaten in the mess shack and had already ridden off to the roundup on Lame Johnny Flats which had started that morning. Tap Latham sat opposite Milly and me, and he wolfed his food like a starved man.

He ate so much and so fast that finally my father stared at him in admiration and astonishment. Milly, pretty in a starched gingham dress, laughed softly, then blushed.

Latham heard that laugh, and looked up for the first time. A dull stain began crawling up out of his shirt collar and climbing toward his ears which were almost concealed by his thatch of black hair that hadn't been cut in months. His blue eyes pinned Milly where she sat; then he stood up and laid his napkin down and reached for his gunbelt on the back of a nearby chair.

"I'll go down and make up my bunk," he said, and started out.

My father jumped into the breach and saved Milly from utter confusion, for she had not meant to hurt Latham. Father said, "You won't be needin' that hogleg, Tap, while you work for me. You c'n hang it on your bunk."

"Yessir," Latham said curtly. He shrugged into his coat and left without another word.

After that he had his meals with the crew, although my father would have preferred that he eat with the family during the short period he was to work for us to avoid any chance of the boys starting a fight, intentionally or otherwise.

During the first week of fall roundup I did my usual round of chores around the home ranch and didn't get a chance to talk to Latham who left with my father and the crew each morning and did not return until night. But I noticed that my sister was behaving very queerly. She didn't sing at her work any more and seemed buried in thought most of the time. It finally occurred to me that she was troubled about having offended Latham and didn't quite know how to go about squaring it with him.

On the third day, I saw Milly leave the house when the crew rode in tired and sweaty from the herd. She singled out Tap Latham deliberately and invited him up to the kitchen to sample some doughnuts she had baked that day. He went, too, though his face was stiff as a plaster cast.

And every day, for the rest of the week, Milly went out of her way to be nice to him. I know now, that in her wish to be forgiven for laughing at him, she bent over backward and went too far, and gave Latham the wrong ideas. After all, she was promised to Bob Chadburn and Bob wasn't the kind of hombre to wittingly play second fiddle to a lobo.

I began to see the hungry light in Latham's eyes every time he looked at Milly, but I didn't dare say anything to anybody about it. Then, one morning a week after he had arrived, I happened by the barn one evening and saw one of our hands, Charley Shook, peeking through a crack in the boards. I went around to the front of the barn and heard voices. They belonged to Milly and Latham.

Crawling closer, I saw them both near the last stall where he kept his pony. They had been talking quietly, but suddenly Milly wheeled and started to leave. Latham had her in his arms in a flash, and had her chin cupped in one of his slim hands. His eyes were blazing and almost black. He kissed her, and she staggered back, white to the lips.

At first she couldn't utter a sound, but after a tense, still moment she gasped out, "Tap Latham, I reckon you've forgotten who you are!"

I knew she hadn't meant it the way it sounded, that he was the scum of the earth, but Latham flinched as though she had slapped him in the face. His mouth flattened cruelly, and he said, very slowly and distinctly, "You been leadin' me on, you little Jezebel! I been honest about it, but you acted a damned lie!"

Milly's hands leaped to her flaming face. Her eyes burned him. "Oh, you—you—liar!"

He never blinked, but I saw fury ripple the muscles of his jaw. Suddenly he had her by the wrist and was dragging her toward him. He held his face close to hers, and his was gray with strain. "Listen," he snarled, his eyes hot light, "I never told a lie in my life! I've done wrong things, but I never lied! You hear? *You're* the liar, not me! You made me think you felt about me like I felt about you, you stuckup hussy!" Then he flung her back and she almost fell before she managed to stumble out of the barn and up the path toward the house.

I HEARD her sobbing as she passed me, never knowing I was there, cringing against the barn. I thought about Charley Shook out behind the barn and felt sick to my stomach. Charley had a tongue that wagged more than was good for him or anybody else, although he never meant harm by his gossip, and I knew that if Bob Chadburn got wind of what had happened between Latham and Milly, the fat would be in the fire.

My father ordered Latham to remain at the ranch the following day because Latham was a first class blacksmith and there was a string of ponies that need shoeing with the county roundup only half over.

I hung around the forge at our blacksmith shop, trying to make talk with Latham, but he had turned surly and almost ignored me. I felt genuinely sorry for him, but didn't dare show it without making him suspicious.

At noon that day Bob Chadburn rode in from the roundup on his smooth black and asked to see my father. Bob was a big blond man in his late twenties, steady of manner and eye. He was owner of the Bar-Y outfit, and there was something solid about him, like pie for breakfast.

I took one look at his face as he went in the house and knew what he had come for. He was closeted with my father for nearly an hour, and I heard them arguing, heard father plead-

ing desperately, which was unlike him. He usually gave orders and they were obeyed.

When the meeting ended finally, and Bob had gone off to the herd. I heard my father calling for mother and Milly. I got as close to the kitchen as I could, and listened. I heard mother saying, "You'll have to keep him at the ranch till roundup's over and then pay him off and send him on his way!"

"I can't do it, Sarah!" my father said angrily. "We're short-handed as is. All I can do is keep an eye on both Tap and Bob and see they don't git together."

Milly said something at that juncture, but her voice was faint and I couldn't get the words. I wandered troubledly back to the blacksmith shop. Latham never looked up, and I squatted on my hunkers and began whittling at a pine stick. I was startled when I heard a step behind me and looked up to see Milly standing there, helplessly looking at Latham.

He merely glanced at her and went on with his work, shoeing a sorrel mare.

"I—I'm sorry," Milly said in a small voice finally, "sorry I made you—kiss me."

I stared at her, then at Latham. He straightened slowly, letting the mare's hind foot drop from between his knees. He stood there in his leather smithy's apron, very tall and very still. Then he drawled, "I got plenty of kisses to waste. Besides, man has to practice."

The bitterness in his voice went through me like a knife. But Milly stood her ground, her cheeks ablaze. "I shouldn't have called you a liar."

I remembered my father's statement about Tap Latham not having any family pride. Maybe he didn't, but he certainly had enough pride in himself for three men. It began to anger me seeing the way he coldly listened to my sister while she humiliated herself before him.

Milly said, stubbornly, "I do want to be friends with you, Tap."

"Keep your friendship," he said in that cold, contemptuous voice. "A lobo don't need friends."

I saw the futility in Milly's hazel eyes, saw her turn slowly and walk away. Halfway up the path, though, she pulled her shoulders up and raised her chin, for my sister's pride was as strong as Latham's, and, though he had tried to crush her, she had actually made a fool out of him again. But this time it was his own fault. The terrible, beaten look in his pale eyes told me he knew it, too.

He stood there, tall and taciturn, then abruptly bent to his tapping as though nothing had happened to interrupt him. I stood up and glumly followed Milly, my hands shoved deep in my jeans, scuffing the yard's thick dust with angry kicks. I almost hated Latham then.

That night, right after supper, a lot of riders came up the trail and drew rein before the house. Two men lit down and went in the house where my father received them in the high-beamed living room with the steer horns on the walls. One of the men was Lew Parker, boss of Spanish Bit. He was a small, wiry man but he had a booming voice. He said to father, "Bascom, you've got to spank that Latham with a cactus pad and have him on his way!"

"Why?" my father asked calmly. "What's Latham done?"

"Plenty," Todd Langhorn, another rancher, chipped in crankily. "If we had proof, we'd string him high and watch him kick!"

"Somebuddy's been cuttin' the big herd nights," Parker took the lead again. "We found a lot of sign leadin' down towards Fiddler's Ford and over the Hump towards the county line. One man's been doin' it all. You took Latham in, knowin' he's no good, so it's up to you to git shet of him, or we'll do it fer yuh!"

"I got a note to meet after cattle settlement next Sat'd'y," Langhorn said. "I can't afford to lose even a dozen steers this year. And that goes for ev'rybuddy in this roundup, too!"

But my father, always a man of thorough justice, defended Tap Latham with complete conviction in his innocence. "Tap couldn't be the man," he said with emphasis, "because he's been in my bunkhouse every night since roundup started a week ago. Furthermore, I won't allow anybody to spread that kind of talk about a man of mine."

"You say he's never left your bunkhouse?" demanded Langhorn. "Then who's been prowlin' around the Latham homestead on the Ford the last few nights? One of my boys seen a light in the cabin twice!"

My mind pegged back to the day Latham had arrived, and I remembered his statement that he meant to claim his property and live on it when the taxes were paid. Maybe it was true he had been stealing back there nights. I could believe that, but not the story about his rustling, though his father and brother had done just that three years before.

"I know nothin' about any lights," my father said stoutly, "but I do know you're not goin' to blame any cow stealin' on my man without good proof!"

"The beef's gone," Parker growled. "A hundred head or more! Who's goin' to stand the loss?"

My father went clear out on his limb then, and even I realized that he was taking a terrible risk. He said, "The drive starts tomorrow. I'm makin' myself accountable for Tap Latham's actions till I come back with the beef money to pay you off. Does that satisfy you boys?"

It evidently did, because they left and the

whole party fogged down the trail, heading for the roundup fires, ten miles away.

LATER that night, in my bedroom next to the kitchen, I heard my father holding a kind of council of war with mother and Milly. Father's voice was urgent. "I'll not stand by and see that boy drove back to outlawry! I'll back him till hell freezes, and then skate with him on the ice!"

"It's like you," my mother said, "to want to ride with a man when he's alone, but I wish you'd find some way to keep him at the ranch."

Milly interrupted, her tone gentle but worried, "I tried to talk to Bob, but he wouldn't believe me when I said it was all my fault. I'm afraid of what might happen if they should meet face to face!"

"I'll do my best to keep them apart," my father said. "But he's got to show himself out there with the crew or right off everybody'd figure he was up to some mischief, and one thing'd lead to another, and—"

Mother broke in anxiously, "All right, but Sam, for goodness' sake, don't let Tap wear a gun!"

For my part, I didn't think it was fair to Latham keeping him in the dark about what was going on all around him, especially if there was a chance he'd have to fight Bob Chadburn. So I waited till everybody had gone to bed and then got up and dressed and crawled out of my window. It must have been long after midnight because there was no light in the bunkhouse. And when I reached it, I heard the snores and garglings of the punchers.

I was starting back to bed when I saw the glow of a light down in the barn. I hurried down the path and cat-footed right up close. Two men were talking in low tones inside. The filing hum of their voices drew me forward. Those voices were something alike, one a little deeper than the other. The deep one was Tap Latham's.

Tap was saying, "You got no business comin' back here, Hack! I told you I was through when they strung pa up!"

Cold sweat cracked out all over my body, and I stood there shivering and shaking, wanting to run away but not daring to, for I might be heard. The second voice spoke, and it was heavy with whisky. "A helluva way to greet your brother!"

I screwed one eye into a knothole in the barn siding and saw them, Tap facing his brother in the pale glow of a lantern on the floor. Hack was about the same build as Tap, a bit fleshier around the face maybe, not much. But Hack's eyes were his outstanding feature, and they differed from Tap's in their bloodshot squintiness. His face was darkened by a week's growth of black beard and it gave him a tough look. He wore a revolver low on his thigh, the holster tied with thongs to his leg, the way a professional gunman packs his weapon.

I heard Tap say harshly, flatly, "They'd hang you, too, if they caught you here!"

"Who's gonna tell 'em?" Hack leered drunkenly, swaying a bit on his long thin legs. "Not you, brother! You ain't got the belly to do it! Pa allus said you was a milksop."

It sickened me to see the pallor on Tap's face, the dread in his clear eyes. I was sure he could break that drunken fool in half if he'd wanted to. "You want money?" Tap asked dully. "If that's what you come after—"

Hack hiccoughed. "Sure, I want money. Who the hell don't?" He swayed a moment, then said, "Jest the two of us left, son. We gotta stick together."

"You're too drunk to talk," Tap said in a stifled voice. "Go on back to the Ford and sleep it off, but don't burn no lights or you'll git caught"

"Me drunk?" Hack sounded incredulous. He teetered, laughing in a gusty way. Then I saw him reach down and pull out his gun, and held my breath. He brandished it at Tap, then held it still, astonishingly steady.

"Put that back!" Tap said hoarsely.

"Who's goin' to make me?"

"You always been too quick on the trigger, Hack! Put it back!"

Hack rolled the weapon deftly—it looked like a silver pinwheel in the lantern's light—then he holstered it and said, "I hear there's goin' to be a beef settlement on this spread next Sat'd'y. There'll be plenty of cash on the hombre that makes the divvy. Let's me and you—"

"No!" Tap said through taut lips. "Not any!"

"Aw, come on," Hack said in a blurred and wheedling tone. "We c'n hit fer Arizony and live high, wide and handsome on that dinero!"

"Now, look," Tap said, urgently, patiently. "There ain't room in this country for the two of us. I got here first, you savvy? You 'hole up down at the homestead and I'll come down first chance I git and I'll pay your fare to Arizony and plenty besides!"

Hack's voice turned wary, sharp. "Say, you ain't tryin' to gimme the old hooraw, Tappie? If I thought you was, I'd—"

Tap didn't let him finish. "Go on, Hack, like a good feller! I wouldn't cross you, honest! Only for God's sake don't git caught! They'd crawl my hump, too!"

I didn't wait to hear any more. I rattled my hocks away from that barn and climbed through my window and jumped into bed, clothes, boots and all. But I didn't sleep much that night. I kept thinking about what could happen at Pine Top, and I knew I couldn't do a thing to stop it without blabbing everything I'd seen and heard. I was still trying to decide

on a course of action when I sat down to breakfast next morning.

And so, when my father finally pushed back his chair and stood up, buttoning up his short sheepskin riding coat with one hand while he finished off his coffee with the other, I said, "Can I go and watch the start of the drive today?"

He frowned at me. "No. You've chores to do at home."

I wanted to argue, to plead, but glanced at my mother and saw the disapproval on her face. "I'm old enough to do a man's work," I said sullenly. "Why can't I—"

Milly came in out of the yard and I stared open-mouthed. She rushed through the kitchen, her cheeks blowing hot and cold, and I knew she'd been talking to Tap Latham again.

WHEN I finished my chores that morning, I'd made up my mind I wasn't going to let them push me down any longer. I saddled, bridled and cinched up Jigger, my pinto pony, and rode him up on the bench south of the ranch. From a high pinnacle I could see far down across our valley and into the distance where the roundup was.

Against the pink and lavender and lilac haze over the basin, a huge dun-colored cloud of dust drifted against the blue fall sky. The wind whipped it flat as it rose and it looked like a beckoning finger. I pictured the dust and confusion, the racket of bawling steers and pounding hoofs, the sights and smells of an early Montana cattle drive.

There are times in a boy's life when parental discipline becomes unreasoning and must be breached if he is to keep his pride and independence. This was one of those times. I wanted to be near Tap Latham in case he got in trouble because I knew I alone could help him when the pinch came. I admired him and wanted him to stay honest and upright like my father and Bob Chadburn.

Jigger didn't need any urging when I pointed his head south and let him run. It was a thrilling sight that spread like a living painting before my eyes as I rode over the last long swell that morning and reached the holding spot. For a week they had been hazing the cattle toward Lame Johnny Flats. Now the roundup was over and the basin seethed with thousands of red-backed, white-faced steers. The drive had already begun, for I saw a thin column of beef straggling off to the westward, its vanguard already disappearing in the haze.

It was like a sea of steers, with islands of mounted men here and there, men who rode their horses in and out, cutting out some animals, bunching others, and adding to the procession that presently would be five miles in length and, in twenty-four hours, would reach New City Falls where it would end in the stock pens, and be shipped by railroad to Saint Louis.

I rode toward the herd through a din that was like the sound of war, and found the lineup of chuck wagons in a clump of greasewoods. Pine Top's wagon was the first one in the camp, standing pole down with open bows near a seep. Our foreman, Pappy Lardner, was the only hand near it, and he was figuring numbers in the tally book. He looked up as I drew rein and dismounted, and he winked at me and said, "Does your old man know you're here?"

At the same moment a horseman galloped in behind me, and I turned and saw my father's chunky body perched in the saddle of his singled-footed roan. His mouth was like a cut, his eyes red-rimmed with dust and smoke. He pulled in hard, saying, "Thought I told you to stay home."

I stiffened up to my full five feet four and a half and said defiantly, "I done my chores. You didn't say I couldn't come when I done 'em."

He started to say something harsh, then checked the words, and his gaze ran back over the roundup. I looked and saw Tap Latham on a big bay cutting horse, and he seemed to be the center of some kind of commotion. Other riders began to come in, and suddenly I recognized Bob Chadburn's high-riding shape slide out of the dust on his black.

My father said, "Stay here!" and set spurs to his roan and galloped toward the scene of trouble.

Despite the conviction that I'd get a whupping for it, I hopped on Jigger and followed him. I hung back, though, and halted behind a cowboy who had his back to me. More riders were drifting in from all sides, and I saw the grim, attentive expressions they all wore, as if this was the moment they had been waiting, maybe even yearning for. I felt sick when I thought about Tap's gun hanging on his bunk at the ranch.

There was a tightness in my throat as I saw how straight and unafraid Tap looked, sitting his horse with dust on his hat and eyebrows, his slim hands holding the reins high against his chest. He was staring at Chadburn who had halted not ten feet off and was dismounting.

Chadburn faced around, and said to Tap, "Git down, mister! I'm goin' to hand you the thrashin' you deserve!"

Latham didn't hurry. He sat a moment, unmoving, deliberative, his blue eyes very keen and very bright. Then he swung a chapclad leg over his saddle and stepped out of the stirrups to the ground.

My father's voice cracked out, "Bob, you promised me—"

But Chadburn waved him away and stripped off his gauntlets. Tall and broad, heavier by

fifteen pounds than Latham, he made a fine appearance, with the sun on his wavy blond hair and a kind of exultant gleam in his eyes. He unbuckled his gunbelt and threw it to one of his men, immediately going for Latham with his fists in front him, boxer-style.

Latham stood perfectly still, his arms hung down, his eyes steady and narrowed. Chadburn reached him and swung hard with a right, and missed. Latham had lifted his arms suddenly, knocking the big man's blow aside and upsetting his balance.

But Chadburn pivoted and rammed a left at Latham that went home. Latham staggered and went down on one knee. But he was up in a flash and stabbing with both fists at his adversary, thrusting Chadburn back a yard or two.

Both men fought silently, circling, punching, weaving. Then Chadburn lunged. It was an unleashed, uncoiling movement. His fists shot out and crashed through Latham's guard, buffeting him to his knees where he stayed, shaking his head, his shaggy black hair falling forward like a mane.

Chadburn waited, just out of range, while Latham slowly rose. Latham turned, his teeth set against pain, his eyes dull. He found Chadburn and charged at him, his boots boiling the dust. But the big man measured him, coldly let go, with his weight behind it. The blow struck Latham on the jaw and snapped his head back. He fell in a slow bend, his body arching unwillingly backward, and when he hit the dust he turned over and tried to rise again. But his arms shook and would not hold him up. He sagged on his face and lay still, the wits knocked out of him.

I hated Bob Chadburn at that moment. I saw my father bend to help Latham to his feet, but it took two men to do it. I didn't dare remain, didn't want to, for that matter. I turned Jigger and went back to our chuck wagon near the greasewood seep.

I was standing near the wagon's tailgate when father brought Latham. I watched Latham wash his bruised face in a bucket of muddy water Pappy Lardner brought him. When he'd got the blood and dirt off, I saw that one of his eyes was swollen shut, but the expression he wore didn't need both eyes to make it terrible. It was the set of his mouth, I think, and for a moment, while my father tried to talk to him, I knew I was looking at a man who wanted to kill even more than he wanted to go on living.

AFTERWARD, my father made me sit down and eat some cold sourdoughs and beans, then ordered me on Jigger and back to the ranch. I obeyed meekly enough, for I was already planning how I'd ride a ways and then come back when everybody would be too busy to notice me. But my father had guessed what was in my mind, and called Charley Shook in from the herd and made him side me home.

I was sullen and bitter during that hour and a half ride, not speaking to Charley, but when we came in sight of the Pine Top roofs, I said, "If anything happens to Bob Chadburn it'll be your fault, because you blabbed it all over what you seen and heard at the barn that day!"

Charley stared at me blankly for a long moment before his ears began to glow. He coughed a few times, and finally mumbled, "Latham's no damn' good! Besides, Chadburn kin take keer of hisself, I reckon!" Then he turned his horse and rode back toward the herd.

My mother was at the corral when I rode in, her face as hard as metal, as it looked when danger threatened our family on other occasions. "I ought to tan you," she said, "but I'll let your father tend to it. Offsaddle your pony and put your kack under my bed. You'll not be riding out again where you ain't wanted!"

I hauled the saddle off Jigger without opening my mouth. That must have made her worry because she gave me a sharp glance and asked, "Are they all right out there?"

"Shore," I said casually, seeing Milly come down the path, hurrying so her skirts whipped. "Same old hoot and holler and sand in the grub! I ain't missin' much!"

But I knew that last part of what I told mother was a lie, because I was missing what might turn out to be the beginnings of a gun fight. A cloud seemed to hover over the ranch all the rest of that day, and it didn't lift even when the crew came home that night and Latham was with them. My father wasn't, though. He and Bob Chadburn had traveled with the trail herd and would not be back until Saturday, the day of the big dance and my sister's wedding.

During the next few days I felt I atoned for my disobedience. My mother and Milly made a slave out of me, chasing me on errands from morning to night, moving furniture, toting canned stuff up from the root cellar, cleaning, mopping, besides all my regular chores. The house smelled of baking pies and cakes and raised bread and ammonia and brown soap.

Friday morning the neighbor women began to arrive to help in the final preparations for the wedding and dance. From then on the ranch house was no place for a boy. It was full of the foolish racket women and girls make, chattering and squawking like jays in a bramble patch. The fuss they made over Milly's wedding gown was disgusting and then some.

I took refuge in the stables, but found out Tap Latham had gone to town so I lay in the

haymow until late afternoon, waiting for him to come back. When he came, though, he ignored me completely and shooed me when I tried to trail him around.

After supper I went back to try again, and this time he was not in such a surly mood. He was mending bridles in the stable door, a cigarette stuck to his under lip. It was when he looked up after some remark I made about the wedding that I saw the wary expression in his eyes. It was more than that—it was a defeated look. It frightened me.

I blurted, "Tap, why don't you leave?"

He stared at me, the dead cigarette between his lips. "What for?" he finally asked.

I floundered, stammering out some inane reason.

"Can't leave," he said, going back to his mending. "Got to wait till your pa comes home and draw my time. But I'll pull the pin after that if it'll make you feel any better."

I knew I'd never get another chance to put him on his guard. I said, gathering courage slowly, "I savvy you wouldn't do nuthin' wrong that'd hurt anybody, but—hadn't you orter tell about your brother?"

He never blinked, never looked up from the bridle he was working on. But I felt his manner change like a chill in the air. After a long time, he breathed, "Might've knowed you'd been spyin' on me! You and your big mouth!"

"No!" I cried. "I never—"

He stood up and threw the bridle down. Before I knew it his strong hand clamped my shoulder and he was dragging me into the stable. I fought him, thinking every moment was my last on earth, but he pushed me into an empty stall and held me against the wall one-handedly. I didn't dare look at his face. "Who knows about Hack comin' here?" he snarled. "Spit it out, kid, or I'll throttle you!"

"Nobody!" I gasped. "Nary a soul but me!"

"If you're lyin'—" His grip tightened like iron and hurt. Then he made a swift mark with a stiff forefinger around the top of my head. "Tell anybody and there'll be a lot of daylight lookin' down on your tongue!"

He let me go then, and I don't remember getting back to the house. I hardly even knew I was still alive until I opened the kitchen door and all the woman-racket hit me in the face.

I WAS still scared when Saturday morning came, but mother and Milly were too excited over the wedding to notice I didn't eat any breakfast and ducked back to my room, leaving my chores undone. But the more I thought about Tap and the trouble he was in, the more I admired him. I conquered my fear along toward noon and came out of hiding.

The first guests began to arrive at about the same time, and for the next two hours rigs and saddle horses came into the yard in a steady stream. They were lined up under the cottonwoods, nose-bags on the horses, and Pappy Lardner came after me and gave me the job of tending them. I toted hay for a while, then went up to the house to wash up and change my clothes.

When I finally joined the crowd in the living room, the hoedown was in full swing. About twenty or thirty couples whirled on the bare floor, and as many again strung out along the walls, looking on, beat time to the fiddles with their hands and feet.

The preacher danced with my mother, and they made a showy pair—she in a pale blue gown that matched her eyes and went well with her silver hair, he in a cutaway coat and stove-pipe pants and his white collar on backward.

My sister was in her room with her attendants. I'd had a peek at her, all in white, her eyes bright, cheeks like rose petals, for when my father arrived with the beef money he would bring the man she was going to marry. I didn't know then that she'd caused an awful scene that morning when she told mother she wasn't going to live with anyone that was brutal enough to beat another man down the way Bob Chadburn had.

The noise in our house was as big as the racket in a calf corral at feeding time. The fiddles screeched and sawed, and the building trembled on its foundations with all that weight jigging on the floor. Then I saw Tap Latham shoulder in through the hallway door where I was standing. He'd had his hair cut in town, and he smelled of bay rum and cigarettes, and he wore a brand new red-striped shirt with green garters above the elbows to hold up the too-long sleeves. His hair looked black as new paint and there was a string-straight part in it. Besides that, he'd left his bell spurs behind with his chaps, and wore a belt with green stones set in it.

I held my breath, seeing him stand there so tall and grave, staring at the crowd, for I knew he was looking for Milly somehow, and was disappointed at not finding her there. I saw his mouth go tight and his blue eyes cloud, and I felt all gray and dry inside.

At the same moment the music stopped playing the reel, and a bunch of cowpokes came piling in off the front porch, yelling and doing little jig steps on the polished floor. I looked hard for my father, but neither he nor Bob Chadburn were with the group.

Then somebody hollered, "Where's Bascom and Bob?"

One of the newcomers yelled, "Be here in an hour. They're down at Chadburn's now washin' up and changin' fer the weddin'."

"Bascom get the beef money?" another voice wanted to know.

"Shore has! A dollar a head more'n we figured on!"

There was a burst of cheering at the news that meant extra thousands for our people. I looked back to where Latham had been standing, but he had disappeared. With a sinking sensation in my stomach, I went looking for him. I wasn't afraid of him any more, but was calm and steady and determined. Latham wasn't at the stables and he wasn't at the corral. I entered the bunkhouse, filled with the sense of impending doom.

The bunks were piled high with chaps and hats and gunbelts and spurs, gear which the male guests had left there for the rest of the day and evening. I had seen Tap Latham's big revolver hanging in its holster from a nail on his bunk. The nail was still there, but the gun wasn't. I went back into the house.

Then I heard voices yelling in the yard, "Here they come!"

Relief poured over me, and I felt my heart slow down. I pushed through the crowd into the living room. The fiddles had been playing a waltz, but had quit, with couples scattered over the dance floor. Everybody was looking toward the front door. Silence held the room, the ranch, the world, it seemed to me.

I couldn't see over the heads of the crowd, so I found where my mother stood and watched her face to see it light up when my father entered with the bridegroom. At the same moment the preacher began to speak. "Christian friends—"

He didn't get any farther, because there was a commotion at the door and a kind of sigh went up from the crowd. I watched my mother's face and saw it blanch. The rapt look faded from her eyes and was replaced by a kind of taut horror. I saw her draw a quick breath, then strike a hand to her mouth as if to stop a scream.

The crowd opened a channel from the front door, and down that lane of peering, frightened people I saw four men carry a body into the room. They moved with short, quick steps, like pall-bearers carrying a coffin. The man they brought into the house was my father!

EVERYBODY shied away from that grim cortege, but my mother gathered up her skirts and rushed forward to meet them. She did not cry out, but helped them carry father down the hallway to their room. Then I heard Milly's piercing shriek, and the dead silence that came after it.

I went through the crowd, through all that hubbub of whispering and groaning, and reached the door of my parents' room. Milly opened it, to let me in, and her face was as white as winter frost. She told me gently that father wasn't hurt too bad, but had lost a lot of blood, and then she looked straight into my eyes and said in that same soft, terrible tone, "Bob Chadburn's dead!"

My mother was kneeling beside the bed, gripping father's hand. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she did not make a sound. There were three or four men in the room but I didn't care who they were. They were just shadowy shapes, without faces.

Father lay back on his pillow, his face gray and creased with pain. Then he was speaking in a low, but strong tone: "He had us covered when we came out of Bob's house. I had the money in a leather bag. He wore a kerchief across his face and his hat was pulled down." He paused for breath, went on: "He ordered me to throw him the bag. I started to, but Bob went for his gun. He got Bob with his first shot, then fired at me and hit my shoulder. That's all."

"Sam," my mother said, very gently, "do you know who did it?"

He closed his eyes wearily, then opened them. "Can't be sure," he breathed. "It happened so queer—and sudden-like."

One of the men spoke. It was Langhorn's voice. "But he talked, didn't he? You heerd his voice?"

"Yes," my father sighed, "but a man can't be sure—"

The silence was like a weight crushing us all. Langhorn said, "I guess we know enough—"

"It wasn't Tap Latham!" I shouted at the top of my voice. I guess I was crying, too. "It was his brother!"

I could have crawled under the bed the moment I'd said it, for all those eyes burned at me. Even my father lifted on one elbow.

Then Langhorn snapped, "Come on, boys! We're headin' for Fiddler's Ford!"

I went down to the corral, numbly seeing the posse forming, men streaming up into saddles, horses rearing and bucking in the excitement. I knew then that I'd put a rope around Tap Latham's neck for, if he was found at the Ford and his brother was with him, they'd hang both men without a trial!

I smelled the posse's dust all the way to Fiddler's Ford, and Jigger put me down in sight of the Latham cabin in the creek willows only a few minutes after Langhorn and his men had arrived.

A cowboy came slithering over the lip of the draw, and called softly, "Two hosses in the barn! They're here, all right!"

I stuck close to Langhorn, and dropped when he did in the weeds that grew between the wash and the cabin yard. He didn't seem to mind my being there, for he kept muttering curses under his breath, and hitching his rifle along the ground as he crawled in close.

It was growing dark. The sun had dropped behind a floor of fluffy clouds over the western

peaks. Suddenly I saw a light spring on in one of the cabin windows. Langhorn saw it at the same moment and froze motionless in the weeds. Then a gunshot lashed the still air. I thought it had come from inside the cabin, but could not be sure.

Langhorn lifted his rifle and held it in elbow-propped hands, sighting up the barrel with the foresight bracketed on the window with the light behind it. Then I heard voices in the cabin, loud and angry. A shadow passed before the light in the window. I held my breath.

The shadow came back and stopped. It was the shape of a man's head and shoulders. Then Langhorn's rifle cracked open the silence of the hills. He fired one shot, and the shadow vanished from the window as though it had been jerked away. I heard the distant tinkle of falling glass. But the light stayed on, one bright spot against the gloomy shadows of the cabin and the timber beyond it.

Then a posseman yelled, "Here he comes!"

I could hear guns being cocked all around me where cattlemen were crouching in the weeds. Then the door of the cabin opened slowly. In the last thin light of day, a man came out into the yard. He was carrying a small black hand bag, and he walked queerly, like a man who is tired beyond endurance. He dragged his feet and stumbled once, then came on toward where the guns of the cattlemen covered him. It was Tap Latham!

Suddenly everyone was up and running toward him. Langhorn reached him first and snatched the bag out of his hand, throwing Latham backward into the arms of other men who caught and held him with ungentle hands. They dragged him bodily back into the cabin, and I followed, a stone where my heart had been.

There was silence in that lamplit little room where the cowmen stood and stared at Hack Latham, dead on the floor. Langhorn looked around, his mouth like two pieces of iron pressed together. He stared at Tap Latham where he had been thrown back against the chink-logged wall, his eyes dull and lifeless, a widening red stain on his shirt front.

Langhorn said, "He killed his own brother and tried to git away with the money!"

They all stared. Tap had his arms spread out, his hands against the wall as though to keep himself from falling. He looked bewildered, stunned. Then he said, his words coming slow and painful. "I didn't kill him! I—didn't have the belly to shoot him down!"

"Whose bullet hit *you* if it wasn't mine?" Langhorn demanded in a cold and merciless voice.

"Hack's," Tap sighed. "I told him I was goin' to take the money away from him and return it—"

"You left the dance," Langhorn said relentlessly, "and you knowed Bascom and Chadburn was comin' with the money!"

Tap breathed slowly, from the base of his lungs. "I was sure Hack was goin' to hold 'em up, but I didn't savvy where. I came down here because I knowed he'd git his bed roll and grubstake 'fore he lit out for good."

When he finished, I saw Tap's body go limp. I let out a warning yell, but his shoulders bumped down the rough logs and he struck the floor all spraddled-out, before anybody thought to break his fall.

But Langhorn was hunkered down by the dead man, exploring with swift fingers over the still body. Then he straightened, the grim look fading from his big-boned face. "He told the truth," Langhorn said. "This here hombre was killed by a rifle slug! It was Hack's shadder I let go at out there!"

SO THEN we had two wounded men at Pine Top, my father—though he was up and round next day—and Tap Latham who had been put in my bed where they had carried him from Fiddler's Ford.

Milly had stayed up all night to nurse him and try to get his fever down. I'd never seen such a wonderful change come over a person as the one that came over my sister. She was still pale, a little pinched about the mouth, but she smiled every time she left the room where Tap was sleeping. And when he finally woke up and she had spoon-fed him some corn meal mush, I heard her scold him in a very unangry voice.

I was in the kitchen at dinner time, my father and mother, too. They hadn't said two words to me since I'd ridden in with the posse the night before, but now I saw my father look at me in a familiar way, a way I didn't cotton to, nohow. He had his left arm in a sling, and was still a little weak from loss of blood, though he'd eaten three big steaks.

I avoided his gaze and complained to mother: "Why does Milly close the door when she goes in with Tap? They don't talk none, and all I c'n hear is whisperin'!"

"Never you mind!" my mother said in her sternest voice.

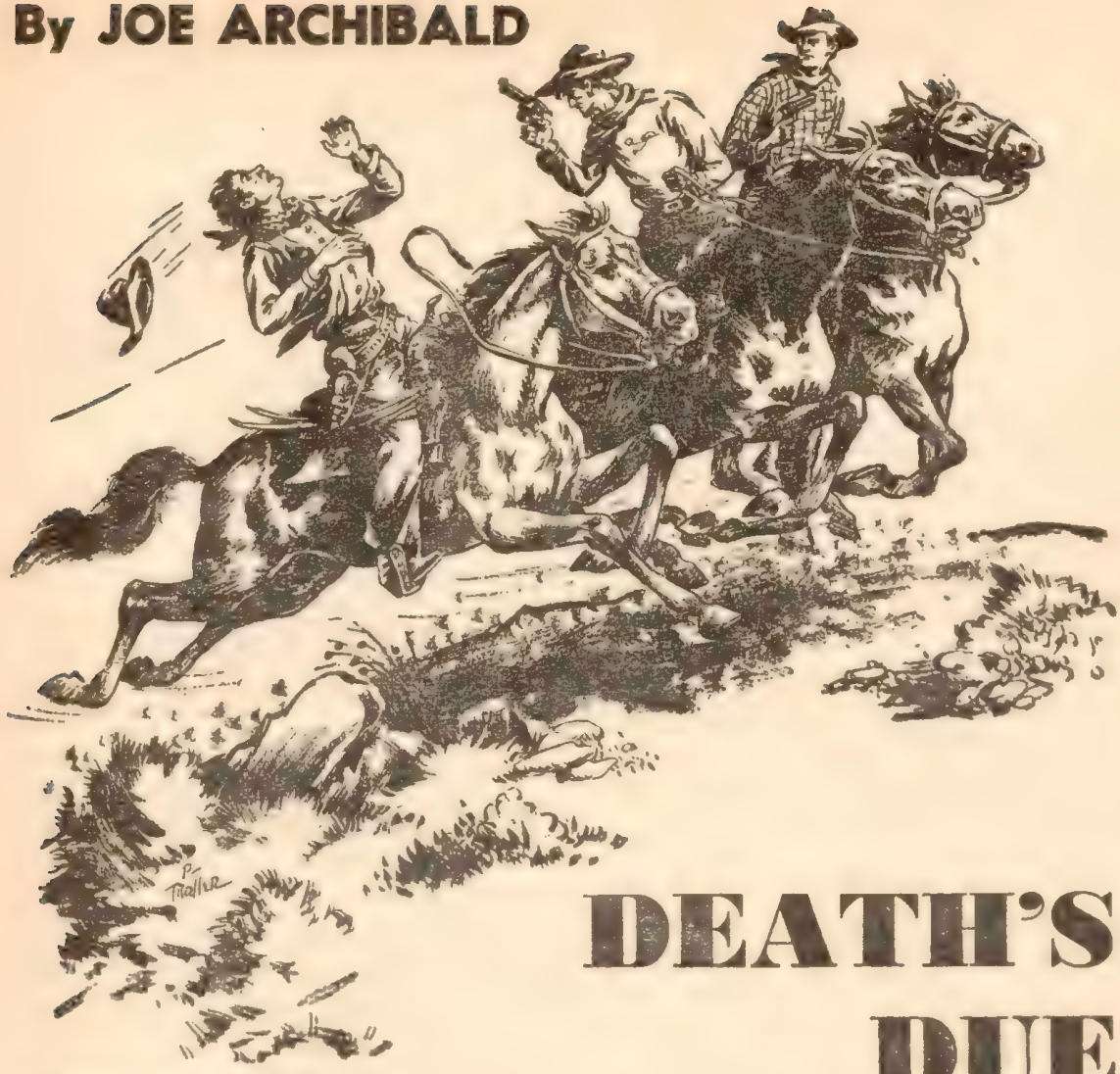
My father cleared his throat. "Young man, you better come out to the woodshed for a minute." He rose to his feet and reached behind the kitchen door for the rawhide strap. "I ain't forgot how you've disobeyed your mother and me, even though I have lost track of how many times it was!"

I looked at him, very sober and grave, though I saw the tell-tale twinkle in his eyes. "Yessir," I said in a meek voice. "Right now, sir?" I knew he didn't have the strength to really lather me.

"Right now," he said.

I did as I was told for once.

By JOE ARCHIBALD



They were still within rifle range when they topped a rise, and Wallie stopped a bullet. . . .

DEATH'S DUE

It was Arnie Kreg's gun-brag that he owed no man—not even for the bullet that killed him!

IN THE best room of McBirney's Hotel, bearing the brass numerals two and nine, four men sat around a table. Every Wednesday night they met to indulge in poker, and for high stakes. Two of them were wealthy cattlemen, one was a banker, and the fourth man was the real estate tycoon of Liberty Springs. Fabulous tales regarding the amount of money that changed hands in this game had been swapped in and around the town for many months, and Ky Berthune, the sheriff, often wished the hotel would burn down and that the game be moved far beyond his jurisdiction.

The banker was laying down a straight flush in spades for all to see when the door opened and a man, the lower part of his face hidden by a faded blue neckrag, stepped into the room. One of the cattlemen, facing the door, slowly lifted his hands, and a half-burned cigar slipped from his mouth and fell onto the table. He said in an incredulous voice, "Gentlemen, it is a holdup."

"It is," Arnie Kreg said. "Everybody up and against the wall and reach for the ceiling. The stakes are high here and I don't aim t' bluff."

The banker said, "Blast his eyes. There's ten thousand on the table," and stared at the hand holding the six-gun.

Arnie Kreg grinned. "In that closet, all of you, and make it quick. Might be cramped, but you'll fit in." He waved them away from the wall and into the closet, slammed the door shut and locked it. Two hours later he was in the bunkhouse of the Bradded L, close to the banks of the Musselshell, and the sack of money and the clothes he had worn on his visit to McBirney's were buried under the pine needles and humus in a swatch of timber three miles away. A sleepy voice said, "That you, Arnie?" and he allowed that it was.

The boss of the Bradded L would ask no questions. Arnie Kreg was a better than average horse wrangler and came and went as he pleased. When horses are turned loose and remain out in the open country long enough, they become as wild and as wary as deer. Once run down and caught they have to be broken in all over again, and so men like Arnie were in demand and drew top wages.

Arnie had made up his mind long ago that a man could never get rich by having a boss. At the moment he was in the pay of the Bradded L simply because it behooved a man of his particular aspirations to sometimes prove a means of livelihood. Besides, spending freely in a town often excited the curiosity of a sheriff, and Arnie grudgingly admitted that the lawman of Liberty Springs appeared to be a capable man.

Arnie was a man possessing a strange and twisted philosophy of life. The world, he was convinced, owed him a living, and he was going to collect. He'd accept no help from a single living soul, for the worst thing that could happen to a man, he'd always believed, was to find himself beholden to another.

He was standing near the Bradded L corral after breakfast the next morning, talking to Ben Wrightstone, his boss, when Sheriff Berthune and three riders came in through the gate. Arnie quickly recognized the bulky man who did not seem at home in a saddle and a sudden unease rippled through him. It was the banker who'd laid down the spade hand. Arnie's surge of panic was short-lived when he reasoned swiftly that he could not have slipped up in any way. The law had to have proof, more than suspicion to go on. He built a smoke to steady his nerve and nodded pleasantly, along with Wrightstone.

The boss said, "Trouble somewhere, Ky?"

Arnie came slowly out of his careless slouch because Berthune and the banker were looking right at him. The sheriff said, "There was trouble last night, Ben. Kreg, you'd better come along with us."

Arnie spat. "What is this?"

"Never mind the song and dance," Berthune snapped impatiently. "We know you held up that game, Kreg. You shouldn't have played with toads when you was a kid."

Arnie's insides knotted up and involuntarily he brought his gun hand up in front of his face and stared at the big wart on the knuckle of his middle finger.

Berthune said, "Bankers are mighty observin' when they're asked to give out money, Arnie," and drew his Colt quickly when he saw he was going to have to use force on the Bradded L hand. He shot Arnie in the fleshy part of his shoulder and the wrangler fell back against the poles of the corral, his gun falling from his hand. "Get his bronc," Berthune said to one of Wrightstone's punchers.

IT WAS two hours before midnight of the same day and the thick walls around Arnie seemed to close in on him like an ingeniously contrived torture chamber. To Arnie his presence in durance vile was altogether incongruous, for getting caught at a misdeed was something that happened to other men. He heard the door of the outer office open, and the sound of Berthune's guard, Charlie Randall, shifting in the creaky wooden armchair.

Randall said, "Hello, Florrie. Glad to see you. That coffee smells good."

"It's extra hot, Charlie."

Arnie knew Florrie Garm by sight. She was a thin and wistful and not too pretty a girl who waited on table at McBirney's. He knew her to be a woman cheated out of most of the good things, the youthful fun she should have had. Every day she was at the mercy of rough and brazen words and mauling hands. It was bruited about in Liberty Springs that Florrie had a sort of understanding with a dry goods drummer, and everyone hoped she had.

The door between the cell room and the office was slightly ajar and Arnie caught scraps of the talk going on.

". . . reckon he did it right enough. What gets into those young bucks, I don't know—"

"I never thought he looked like that kind of man, Charlie. He—"

"You can ask him if he wants coffee, Florrie. I guess it'll be all right."

She came into the cell room and smiled uncertainly and Arnie felt like an animal on exhibition in a cage and immediately snarled like one. "I don't ever want nothin' from nobody, you hear? Git out!"

Florrie Garm pressed her lips tight and looked at him pityingly, he thought, and rancor boiled through him. "Git out, I said!"

She turned and walked out and shut the door all the way. Arnie got up and paced his cubicle and swore that if he had to wait a lifetime for it, he would come back here some day and set fire to the town.

Berthune came to see Arnie late the next forenoon. He had a proposition to make the

prisoner. "You can save yourself a couple of years by telling us where that money is, Arnie. Guess you've never been behind the high walls, on a rock pile for a good five years. I know cons that would hand over fifty thousand if you offered them six months off their sentence."

Arnie was about to tell Berthune where he'd see him first when it occurred to him that he could serve his full time and still not have that ten thousand when he got out. Lawmen would watch every move he made as soon as the prison gates slammed shut behind him. "All right, Berthune. You know that string of timber on the east side of the valley? There's a big moss-covered boulder—"

The next five days told on Arnie and he began to lose control. At the end of the sixth day, half sick with frustration and despair, he sat up on his bunk and heard the girl from McBirney's talking with Charlie Randall. The cell door was closed and the voices were meaningless monotones. Florrie seemed to stay longer than usual. After a while the talk stopped and he guessed the girl had left. Arnie heard the creak and groan of Randall's chair as the guard shifted his bulk, and soon there was nothing but the same oppressive silence.

Arnie got up and tried every iron bar for a weakness, a ritual he had practiced for the last six nights, and finally fell into his bunk, savagely cursing his luck. And then he sat straight up when the cell door opened. Florrie Garm stood there, a finger of caution against her lips. She held a heavy bunch of keys. Arnie, entirely incredulous, heard regular deep breathing out there in the office.

Florrie opened the cell door and stepped back. Arnie jumped forward and caught her arm and she whispered, "No time for talk. I just can't bear to see anything caged up. There are two horses standing at the rail in front of McBirney's. Hurry—I don't know how long paregoric works on a man—"

Arnie took four steps toward the outer office, whirled suddenly and faced the girl. "Look, I never asked you to do this for me. You must be crazy!"

Florrie Garm said, "Hurry, before I change my mind. I am about to start screaming."

Arnie saw the fright and growing indecision in the girl's eyes and he lost no more time. He went into Berthune's office, took the gun from the guard's holster, and ran into the street. All the noise that was left in Liberty Springs boiled out of a saloon two blocks away, and he had a bronc loose and was in the saddle before the warning sounded. He was almost at the end of the street when a bullet wind-ripped close to his head and went singing into the darkness ahead. The confusion behind him built up, then swiftly faded as the black bronc under him lengthened its stride.

Three hours later, Arnie rode into a small box canyon and listened intently. The sounds of pursuit no longer rang in his ears and he got off the horse and gave it the rest it needed. Dawn found him well beyond the jurisdiction of Sheriff Berthune, and he made his first real camp and hunkered down on the grass to consider his next move. He had names and faces catalogued in his mind, and after sifting them carefully, decided on throwing in with certain birds of a feather. Largo Trask and Pecos Bill DeMoss. Thinking of these two brought the name of a certain town to mind. Ormsville. It was approximately fifty miles due southwest, a place where men of his fraternity were not altogether unwelcome.

Ten miles nearer the refuge, Arnie thought of Florrie Garm and he was ashamed of a brief emotion of gratitude. He thought, *She was a chicken-hearted wench. I meant nothing to her and she would have done the same for any man. I never begged her help, and so owe her not a thing. . . .*

IT WAS gathering dusk when the stolen bronc clumped across a hazardous corduroy bridge, the logs of which were not more than a foot above the waters of a brawling stream, and which had been chewed splintery by countless iron-shod hoofs. On firm ground, Arnie Kreg looked down on the town, composed of not more than a baker's dozen frame buildings. A great rocky wall behind the town acted as a wind-break and also as a sounding board for noises of approach on the part of strangers. This town, he knew, would never change, and if it did, it could never be for the worse. He rode down into the town and got off his bronc in front of a place called The Buckhorn.

Just inside the batwing doors, Arnie Kreg stopped and warily looked around him. He saw some faces that were vaguely familiar, and one of these lighted up with recognition as he pressed against the bar and asked for a drink. He was taking it slowly when a man said, "Don't aim to be nosey, but ain't you Arnie Kreg?"

He said, "I don't seem to place you, my friend."

"Wallie Jacks. Once when me and Largo Tr—"

Arnie nodded. "You talk too much, Jacks."

There were no more questions. Talk could become very unhealthy in Ormsville. When Arnie had all the drink he needed, he moved to the rear of the smoke-choked room and became interested in a poker game. He was asked to sit in and he grinned ruefully. "Broke at present," he said, and moved toward a small table near the wall and sat down. As he'd expected, Wallie Jacks joined him.

"Well, Wallie?"

"If you're lookin' for Largo an' Pecos Bill, I can take you where they are, Arnie."

"You take a lot for granted, Jacks!"

"Forget it," the badman said and moved away.

Arnie snapped, "Come here!"

Twenty minutes later he was riding out in the hills south of the isolated town with Wallie Jacks. They rode until midnight and then the light in a cabin's window beckoned from a bowl-like depression in the badlands. Arnie said, "They'll ask me in with 'em. I ain't askin' them."

The sound of thudding hoofs caused the cabin door to fly open and a man holding a rifle, stepped out. Wallie Jacks called out, "Pecos, it's Jacks, an' I brought an' old friend."

Largo Trask got up from a bunk when the three men came inside the slab and sod shack. He was a medium-sized man with a head that would have seemed outsize on a six-footer. He had little squinting eyes and trusted practically nothing.

"Arnie," he said. "I wondered if you'd ever come back this way."

"Don't think you're doin' me no favor, Largo. Unless you need another man, I'll keep movin' along."

Pecos Bill grinned. "Hasn't changed, has he, Largo?"

Early the next day these four men set out from Ormsville, and for the next three years, put lawmen, far and wide, at their wit's ends. One misty September night they swooped down on the town of Liberty Springs and ten minutes after they'd ridden out, McBirney's hotel began to burn. The windows of Berthune's office were smashed by Winch and six-gun bullets, and Arnie wondered if Florrie still brought coffee to Charlie Randall as of yore, and at the same time realized that the satisfaction he'd expected to derive from this raid was not as great as he'd anticipated, for the memory of that night of escape rankled him still and disturbed his pride and his ego.

Three months after that Largo Trask and his outlaws moved in on the little mining and cattle town of Lone Oak, not far from the edge of the desert. Arnie had cased the town carefully the day before and had found out that there was much gold dust in the safe in the assayer's office.

Largo and Arnie, neckrags pulled up over their mouths, walked into the office with drawn guns and demanded the clerk on duty open the safe. The clerk's harmless mien put them off guard and they received a rude shock when the man, on swinging the door of the safe open, suddenly whirled on his haunches and started shooting. A bullet creased Largo's face just as he poured his fire into the clerk and Arnie heard the hue and cry outside and knew there was no time to get the dust. Already Pecos Bill and Wallie Jacks were shooting their way out of Lone Oak when he jumped to the board walk outside. Arnie, vaulting into his saddle, saw Pecos Bill throw up his hands and tumble into the dust, and he knew this was the closest to ruin they'd ever been.

Six miles outside of town, Arnie knew the chances of outrunning the posse were slim. They were still within rifle range when they topped a bouldered rise and Wallie Jacks took a bullet between his shoulderblades and rolled off the back of the galloping horse. Arnie moved in close to Largo and yelled, "They'll figure we're headin' for the hills. We go for the desert—they won't figure we'll be that crazy."

"No grub—little water, Arnie! We might as well hang!"

"Suit yourself," Arnie flung at Largo, and reined the horse off the trail and let it buckle into a rugged slope. Largo was just behind him when he reached a long narrow bench, and he grinned and got set to run the bottom out of his bronc.

AT DAWN they were in the desert and the sun was coming up, a bloody-orange color. The heat increased with the hours, and ahead of them, clear to the sky, was the reddish brown floor of the wasteland. It was flat and sinister, lifeless. Arnie sucked on a pebble and shut his eyes to the impalpable sea of heat. His horse breathed heavily and its hide was streaked with sweat. Largo drew abreast of Arnie and held out an old Army canteen. "Only a swaller, Arnie," he cautioned.

Arnie's incredible obsession proved stronger than his thirst. "Hell with you," he said. "You'd always think afterward I owed you my life. Keep your stinkin' water, an' when you take another drink, be sure you're behind me."

Largo softly swore his disbelief, and dropped back a little.

They rode until late the next afternoon and the pebble in Arnie's mouth felt ten times its original size. Finally his craving for water transcended all other emotions and desires and he turned toward Largo Trask. He saw the outlaw hurl the canteen away from him and now Arnie was sure his time had come. Near the tag end of the afternoon, he lost his senses completely and fell off his horses, his last plaguing thought concerning a debt he owed to someone he could not quite remember.

When Arnie opened his eyes, he looked up at Largo's blurred unprepossessing countenance, and felt liquid manna from Heaven running over his parched and swollen mouth. Largo said, "We doubled back, Arnie, without

knowin' it, and it saved us both. We're in the hills."

"More water," Arnie gasped out.

The cool night air and the water revived Arnie quickly and cleared his mind, and he became concerned over the possible nearness of a posse. "Two of us left, Largo. They'll be lookin' for a pair, so we got to split up. Maybe, in a couple of months I'll drift back toward Ormsville."

Largo said, "There is sense in what you say, Arnie. I think I'll get goin' soon as the fog gets thicker." An hour after midnight he was as good as his word. "Luck, Arnie," he said and rode away.

Arnie slept until morning and then he, too, prepared to put a lot of miles between himself and the town of Lone Oak. Four miles from the desert's edge he drew abreast of a clump of pine and instinct tightened his fist on the reins and he pulled them in hard. An authoritative voice froze the fingers of his right hand inches from the handle of his Colt.

"There's seven guns trained on you, mister!" As many riders came out of the woods, and the two in the van stopped a few feet away from him. One of them wore a star.

Arnie said, "Don't you figure a man has enough trouble crossin' that desert? Why the ambush?"

The lawman said, "We're takin' you into Lone Oak. Wouldn't you like to see Pecos Bill?"

Arnie's face did not change. "Pecos Bill? Seems I heard the name one time." He looked at the man on the horse close to the sheriff's, and suddenly knew who was boss here. The compelling figure wore a suit of expensive black broadcloth, the trousers of which were tucked into beautifully tooled boots. The white V that was his shirt front accentuated the burnt umber hue of his long and heavily-boned face. His Stetson, Arnie thought, cost all of a hundred dollars.

The sheriff said, "Frank, this is one of the outlaws. I'm positive."

"You have no proof, Stuart," the carefully groomed rider snapped. "You a cowhand, friend?"

"A horse wrangler," Arnie said. "Name of Smith."

"I'm Frank Duchain. I need a man to ride rough string." He turned toward the sheriff. "I'll be responsible for this man, Stuart."

"Now, look here, Frank—"

Duchain's face became darkly indignant. "When did you start givin' me orders, Stuart?"

The lawman got smaller in the saddle, and mumbled an apology. Arnie's still swollen lips hurt when he smiled. The sheriff said, "Have your way," and rode away, alone.

Frank Duchain said, gesturing toward the other horsemen, "My men, Smith. Been lookin' for Arnie Kreg and Largo Trask. You happen to run across 'em?"

Arnie shook his head. Duchain laughed. "Let's start back for the ranch."

THAT night, in the long bunkhouse on The Rafter K, a cattle outfit of tremendous acreage, Arnie was made acquainted with his benefactor's importance in the scheme of things and the reason for his affluence. Duchain practically controlled the county, the law included. He had started out ten years ago with a thousand head of cattle and had built up the Rafter K, step by step, and small ranchers had fought back the best they could. Duchain's ruthless and aggressive tactics had quickly dampened their taste for a finish fight and they had finally accepted certain offers and withdrawn to more peaceful climes.

Arnie singled out a few men in the bunkhouse and recognized them for what they were. He mentioned the name of the Lone Oak sheriff and laughter rippled through the haze of smoke.

"He wears the star because the boss pinned it on him, Smith. Duchain owns the town."

"Married?" Arnie asked.

There was a strange silence in the bunkhouse for a few moments and it was broken by a scornful laugh. A voice came out of the semi-darkness in back of the place. "Leave the woman out of this talk."

"We'll talk as we please, Harry," a chunky man mending a pair of levis snapped. "He has a wife. Brought her back from a town somewhere in Wyomin'. Went there on business, and saw her an' courted her quick and married her. That's the way the boss works, Smith. Treats her the way he does most everythin' in his pay. Cracks the whip an' keeps her in her place."

Arnie grinned. "Figure the boss has plenty of sense when it comes to women. You got to break 'em like horses an' keep 'em that way."

Out on range the next day, Arnie Kreg wormed more information out of one of Duchain's punchers. He was a garrulous man and needed little baiting. "A stronger woman would try an' kill Duchain, Smith. Only the other day he brought friends out from town, includin' two women of a kind. His wife ordered 'em out an' the boss used his hand on her and words we could hear out in the yard. Harry Murch, that was the man who didn't want no talk of her last night, made some mention of Duchain's treatment of his wife, and it got back to the boss. When you get a good look at Murch, you can still see the lumps on his face."

"No concern of his," Arnie said, "Duchain should have shot him."

"Harry would die for Duchain's wife, Smith," the garrulous one said slowly. "And most likely will."

Arnie switched the subject. "Duchain must have at least a hundred riders. Some of 'em I know I've seen before."

The puncher looked at Arnie. "You figure right. They would rather work for the boss than hang somewhere. Duchain knows who you are, and so do I."

Arnie sucked in his breath as the significance of the puncher's words struck home. He said, "What does Duchain pay my kind of man?"

"Sixty a month an' found."

"That ain't enough for me," Arnie snapped.

"It has to be, my friend." The rider grinned at Arnie and chewed more slowly on his cud. "An' he'll show you he knows how tight a grip he's got on you, in some way or another. Duchain is like a big cat playing with mice. He knows there ain't a man with the courage to—"

Left by himself a few minutes later, Arnie felt trapped for the second time in his nefarious life. He knew that Duchain would have a dozen salty riders on his heels a few moments after he made an attempt at escape. Duchain had saved him from the law and would always remind him of a debt, and his soul revolted at the thought. His impulse was to leave at once and he reined his horse away from the cottonwoods and started riding slowly across the bench. Three riders angled toward him from the left and one said, "No cows over towards where you're goin', Smith."

Arnie stopped. These men had no rope callouses on their hands. Their reasons for being on Duchain's payroll were grimly obvious. "Thought my bronc had come up lame," he said. "Was walkin' it around."

Frank Duchain threw his weight and his ironic sense of humor against Arnie Kreg the next morning. He ordered Arnie to hitch up the buckboard and take Mrs. Duchain into Lone Oak. "She's got a lot of stuff to buy for the commissary, Smith. She'll need some help."

"That's work for a broken down yard hand," Arnie protested. "I'm a horse wrangler, Duchain. You had me cutting out beef yesterday."

"You got your orders—Kreg! And keep one thing in mind—call me 'Mister'!"

Arnie nodded, a terrible dryness in his throat, and walked away. He had hated men before but not with the intensity of the hate he now had for Duchain. He went to work and hitched up the buckboard and drove it up to the door of the ranch house. The woman waited, a bright shawl over her head and shoulders. She climbed into the wagon without his help and settled beside him.

"You're new here?"

Arnie glanced at her and she turned her face toward him as the buckboard went through the gate and out to the dusty road. Arnie pulled back on the reins and swore with amazement. "You!" he finally forced out.

The woman's eyes became wide. She did not have to answer. The emptiness in those eyes, the hollows in her cheeks, one of which carried proof of a man's brutality, spoke loudly enough. Once she had been Florrie Garm.

Arnie said, "Hell's fire!" He lashed at the team savagely and the buckboard careened wildly around a sharp bend. "I've heard talk," he said finally. "You takin' all that from the man—why?"

"You knew McBirney's. The drummer never came back, Kreg, and then Duchain came to Liberty Springs and we—where would I go if I ran away? I'd have no claim on his support if I left his bed and board. He has many friends. I have but one."

"Women hug their chains," he said, trying to forget what this woman had done for him. "Nobody forced you to marry Duchain."

"You knew McBirney's."

"Serves you right. Marryin' a man you didn't love."

"I was desperate, Kreg. Weren't you ever that way?"

Arnie turned on her angrily. "I don't owe you nothin'. I never asked you that time to—"

Mrs. Duchain dropped her eyes to the boards at her feet. "I didn't say you did. You owe me nothing." Her shoulders began to shake and he heard her soft crying, and despite himself, remembered back to the night he had cried for escape. *Her plight is of her own doing. It is no concern of yours. What you can't understand is why you're sitting here and not some other man.*

He glanced toward Duchain's wife and saw the bruise on her cheek, and felt the blow the man had struck against him, one far more painful than a physical one. It had degraded him and shattered his cherished competency, had left him altogether servile and beholden. For once in his life Arnie Kreg recognized an obligation and it was going to be paid.

SITTING in the saloon waiting for Duchain's wife to do her shopping, Arnie watched a man leave the bar and walk slowly toward him. It was Stuart Chance, sheriff of Lone Oak. He said, "I can wait, Kreg, until you no longer can borrow time."

"You're a hell of a specimen of a man to threaten me," Arnie sneered. "Who tied your hands? If somebody cut them loose, sheriff, would you track that man down and hang him?"

Chance looked long into Arnie's eyes and

wanted to believe what he saw there. But he laughed unpleasantly and turned away.

When Arnie drew up in front of the Rafter K bunkhouse three hours later, he got out of the buckboard and helped the woman with the bundles, and she thanked him and smiled at him wistfully. When he had unhitched the horses and turned them loose, a puncher leaning against the door of the bunkhouse said insolently, "Rough string, huh? You break that buckboard in, Smith?"

Arnie promptly smashed the man in the mouth with his fist and he had his six-gun ready as soon as the man hit the ground. "I don't like that name of Smith," he said. "I'm Arnie Kreg. I'll remind Duchain of that when he gets here."

"I meant no offense," the puncher said, and Arnie felt taller by a foot and warmed to the task before him. He went over to the corral and roped his bronc and saddled it. He tied it to a post where he could get at it easily, and sat down to wait. He remembered the hopeful gleam in Florrie's eyes when he'd left her at the ranch house, and only once before had he looked at a pair of eyes that disturbed him as much. They had belonged to a pariah dog in a town far behind him. Small kids had cornered it and pelted it with stones. . . .

You're not going soft, Arnie. You are going to do what is in your mind because you are in the trap with her. . . .

At five-thirty, Frank Duchain and seven of his riders came into the ranch yard and Arnie, as they rode toward the corral, got up and stretched, and so drew Duchain's attention. The Rafter K boss brought his bronc up short and glanced blackly at the outlaw. "What time did you get back from town?"

"Long time ago," Arnie said, and Duchain rode up to him.

"Blast your heart!" Duchain yelled. "There's no loafin' here, Kreg! I ought to turn you over to the sheriff, and let him stretch your neck. Kreg, you'll rub these broncs down and curry them and after that you'll—"

"You can go plumb to hell, Duchain!" Arnie said, and Rafter K punchers stiffened in their saddles at this gesture of defiance. Duchain's face paled and the shock of Kreg's insolence and his evident challenge paralyzed him for a moment. He got off his horse, his eyes half-blinded with rage. "I'm going to kill you, Arnie!"

"You are?" All the grievances he had built up within him over the years, real and imaginary, assumed mammoth proportions and heated Kreg's blood. Frank Duchain, at this moment was the symbol of all the things he hated about life. "Maybe you forgot you're not abusin' a woman. You got a lot of big mouth, Duchain! Let's see what backs it up!"

For a moment, Arnie thought he saw a small light of doubt in Duchain's eyes. This was the time. He yelled, "Draw!"

Duchain struck. His speed was good enough but his aim was a trifle off, and before he could follow up with a better shot, the world fell from under his feet. He looked as he must feel, Kreg thought—strangely inconsequential, with the debris of his own yard smothering him. But Duchain was dead before he hit the ground.

Arnie reeled toward his horse and tasted salt in his mouth. A hot iron was in him and he wished someone would pull it out. He caught at the saddle horn and held himself erect and turned slightly and faced Duchain's punchers.

"Go ahead an' finish me off," he said mockingly. Their faces were distorted and blurred and looked to Arnie to be under water.

He heard a voice say, "We have no quarrel with you, Arnie," and he was sure it came from Harry Murch, the man with the marks of Duchain's fists on his face. With a terrible effort he pulled himself up on his horse, and swaying in the saddle, saw a blob of color moving away from the ranch house.

The holdup at McBirney's . . . the jail at Liberty Springs . . . Florrie Garm . . . escape . . . Ormsville . . . Largo Trask and Pecos Bill . . . the desert . . . Frank Duch . . . Florrie again . . . the cycle was complete. . . . Arnie Kreg rode halfway to the gate and then fell off his horse.

Late the same day, Arnie Kreg died in Frank Duchain's big bed and just before he passed away there was something he seemed to be trying to say. Florrie Garm, standing beside Harry Murch thought she said it for him. "Yes, it is true. You owe me nothing."

In Lone Oak the next morning, Florrie said to the undertaker, "I want him to have a decent burial. He was not all bad. He paid his debts."

The mortician, being something of an idealist, carved that epitaph in the big wooden slab he placed at the head of Arnie's grave. Not knowing Arnie, he thought the man would like that.

WILD GUNS CALLING
A Novel of Bullets in the Night
By Philip Kechum

In the March Issue Out January 31st.

OLD-TIMER

The old-timer was crazy and he knew it—but he could still figure out a better reason than most men—for dying!

THEY tagged him "Old-timer." Jason Kane, the foreman, said he was crazy, wasn't to be trusted. Mary Alice said no, he's poor and just old; let him stay. So old Sam Timmor caught on at the Double O.

But they found out Jason Kane was right.

Sam Timmor, after two days on the spread, knew how they felt—most of them anyway. He couldn't hide it even from himself. To want to kill a man for thirty years, and to spend the greater part of those thirty years tracking him down was not good for a man. It showed on his face. It made marks on his heart. Sam Timmor knew.

But now he had come to the end of his quest. That first day he'd sat on his wretched horse and looked down the rocky hogback at the ranch cupped in the wooded hills and he didn't smile. He had thought he would. But his bitterness was too deep. It had made marks on his heart. It was a part of him. And here he was.

Tom Watson didn't live down there, he knew, but it was the last ranch on the string at which the cattle buyer would call. It was the place Sam Timmor was looking for—isolated, wooded, rocky. On one of its lonely trails, in a gorge somewhere, he'd have it out with Tom Watson, alone.

A cold wind came off the peaks. Sam Timmor shivered. He tightened his wrinkled, blue lips. His plaid, Cardigan-wool mackinaw couldn't keep out the fingers of cold but it was more than cold that rippled through those tears and worn holes and made him shiver. In ten days, maybe less, he was going to kill a man—and he was glad. He liked that feeling coming into him.

His trappings disclosed he was from the north. His saddle, a Western rig, was double-cinched for popping steers from Montana brush. It was thirty years old; its skirts were ragged, the pommel bare to the iron. Its wood stock showed above the tattered saddle blanket through which the bones of his horse protruded like the ribs of an aged, beached ship. Only the gun, showing up under the mackinaw, displayed signs of care. It was well-oiled and black, with a plain, smooth, walnut grip. It was the brightest thing on Sam Timmor.

He stared watery-eyed at the ranch. He had planned this long and well. He had inquired cautiously. Now he shook the reins of his dismal mount. "Git along. We'll pretend tuh git a job fer a week or two. He'll be along by that time." And he made his way to the neat, well-fed ranch below.

Jason Kane was the first to spot him. "What'll it be, old-timer?" Amusement showed on the lean foreman's face; the boys were sitting around after evening chow.

Sam Timmor swung off stiffly. He stood before them, short, dumpy, ludicrous in his bagged levis and floppy Stetson.

"A job," he said in his cackly voice.

A chuckle came from the cowboys and Jason Kane started to laugh also and then he caught sight of Sam Timmor's eyes. The smile froze on Kane's lips. Sam Timmor's eyes were a yellowish color, bedded in wrinkles. They had a hazel flame in them that grew and died, almost from sight, then flamed again. It was unpredictable. And the blue pinched lips and exceedingly thin nose didn't add pleasantness to its light.

Jason Kane said curtly, "No go, old-timer. You can chow up, then drift." He jabbed his thumb back up the trail.

"I'm a good hand," Sam Timmor said truculently. "I c'n rope an'—"

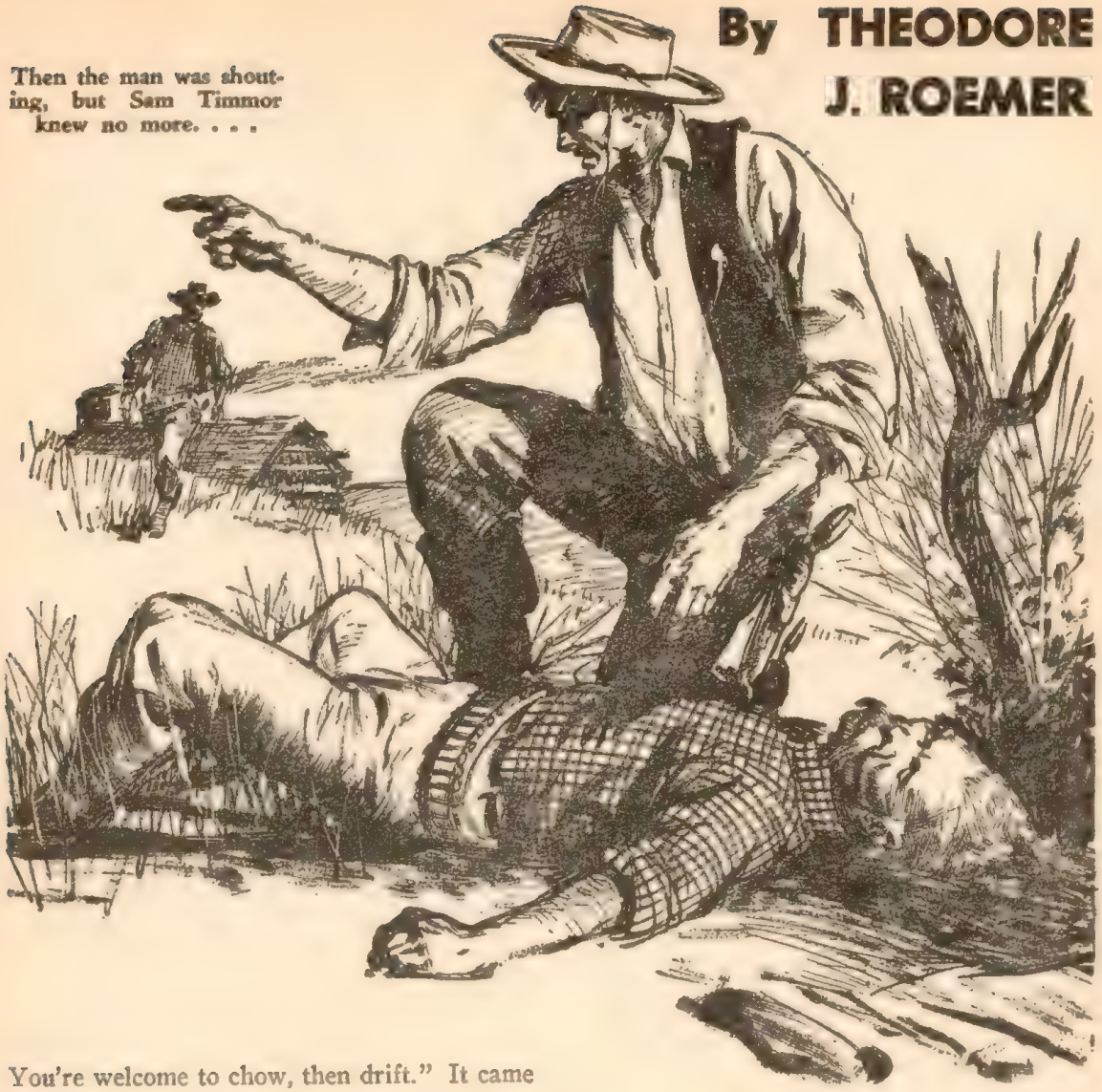
"Roundup's over, beeves cut out for marketing, hayin' done. We got no place for another hired hand. Let two go already."

The yellow eyes wrinkled. Sam Timmor wasn't repulsed. He let his eyes flit over the big ranch yard, to the barns and sheds. He said in his strident voice, "You got a coupla hogs there? Who slops them? You'll be butcherin' 'em soon and mebbe a beef. I'm a good meat cutter. Who milks that critter over yonder?" In twenty seconds he pointed out a score of menial chores that he knew were the bane of men of the saddle.

Jason Kane hesitated. He well knew of the dislike the boys had for these chores; it would be a relief to have a flunky around to do them instead of saddling a man every other week with them and having to curse the man to get them done. But this man in the bunkhouse. . . .

He shook his head. "No go, old-timer.

By THEODORE J. ROEMER



Then the man was shouting, but Sam Timmor knew no more. . . .

You're welcome to chow, then drift." It came curt, final.

Sam Timmor stood there, and slowly he felt anger. The pride that had once made him a good rancher kindled anew from almost dead ashes. It began to flood his head. Turned down for the slop-job on a spread! He, Sam Timmor, who still owned four solid sections of valley graze with a great, box house in the center of it! And a year-around water creek and barns and corrals!

His pride swelled thickly in his neck, choked him. It made no difference to Sam Timmor that that box house was now but a ruin of weathered board and fallen rafters. Or that the barn and corrals were mere brush shambles, overgrown with cottonwood and vines, the haunt of rabbits and ground squirrels. He didn't remember it as such, even though he had seen it not four years ago. He didn't want to remember it as such. He knew it only as firm and growing, as he wanted to feel about himself. And now the blood pounded in his bony temples like mustangs racing over hardpan.

He whispered, "You—you turn me down for *that* job?"

Jason Kane stared at Sam Timmor's face. "Now—now take it easy, old-timer. I—"

Sam Timmor suddenly didn't hear. He put his hands to his temples. The movement pushed off the floppy Stetson; it fell to the dust of the yard. The cold wind struck his head, rifled his thinned gray hair, but Sam Timmor didn't feel it. He couldn't see the foreman any longer, for a yellow haze was coming down before his eyes. He had noticed it dimly at times in the recent past, but never like this. And the pounding was shaking his body down to his run-over boot heels. He tried to straighten himself. He knew the foreman was still talking. Then the man was shouting to the other men, but Sam knew no more.

HE OPENED his eyes. He saw low, rough rafters above him and he knew he was in his claim shack. Tom must be around somewhere, for he smelled woodsmoke and someone was banging a water bucket outside. Tom was a good neighbor.

Sam Timmor lay there and he didn't feel like getting up at once this morning and that was strange, for usually he bounded from the bed. But this morning it was more pleasant to lie here and go over in his mind the work they would do this day. Yesterday they had sawed boards from his timber; today they'd haul them to Tom's claim and erect a breaking corral. They should finish that by noon and in the afternoon he was going to help Tom put down a well. Tom hadn't money for the well casing, so Sam had advanced him the funds. It was worth it to have a good neighbor. He was glad young Watson had come and homesteaded next to him up the valley road. And Ruth liked him. Next spring when Ruth and Sam got married, they'd need a friendly neighbor who could help them in return.

Sam Timmor heard the iron pump creaking again. Time to get up. Couldn't let Tom do all the work.

Then his eye caught sight of a gun. It was hanging in a holster on the wall above his bed. He paused and grew still. It hadn't been here last night. Still the gun looked familiar. Maybe Ruth had brought it when she was here last week, looking over her future home, and he'd never noticed it before. But he knew the thought was a little silly. He would have noticed it and what would a school teacher be doing, packing a heavy forty-five like that around. Besides the holster was greasy. That was no woman's gun!

Maybe Tom knew something about it. And again he started to swing his feet out of the wooden bunk when he saw his hand and he froze. His hands! They were wrinkled! They were claws! He clutched them, but before he could think any farther the door opened and sunlight burst through the dimness of the low room. He stiffened then in amazement. Ruth! He hadn't known she was coming out to the claim this day!

Ruth spoke. "I see you're awake. I am glad."

Sam Timmor felt a chill go through his heart. This girl wasn't Ruth. And then terror seized him. He started around. *This wasn't his claim shack!*

He grasped the blankets, the rough edge of the bunk. He emitted a cackly sound and tried to spring out, but the girl was at his side pushing him back, firmly.

"You stay right in there until I know you are strong again."

A fear seized Sam Timmor. Where was he? What had happened?

The girl's soothing voice went on, "I see you're bewildered, but there is nothing to be afraid of. I am Mary Alice Armstrong. My father runs the Double O. I saw you ride in yesterday afternoon and watched from the parlor window. You were talking to Jason and when I saw you fall I ran out and had them bring you into the house and put in this lean-to. Here—" she turned and held a steaming bowl toward him—"is some broth I made. Eat it."

Sam Timmor took it with his strange, clawlike hands. He looked up at the girl. His rheumy eyes watered with self-pity and he wanted to cry. He looked again at his withered hands and the shock was duller this time but again he felt it and he lay back clutching the rough gray blanket as wave after wave of memory came to his tired brain.

Tom Watson . . . thirty years ago . . . Ruth had gone with Tom Watson. . . . He closed his eyes.

Hate, he knew, is a bitter thing to have in your heart. But what can a man do, what could he do, but hate? And for ten, twenty years to hate—it was a part of him now, just as were these withered claws and his shrunken feet. He could no more take that hatred from his heart now than he could take down that gun and shoot the girl holding that bowl of broth for him.

He suddenly opened his eyes wider. She was yellow-haired. She was smiling. She didn't look like Ruth! He smiled grotesquely, tremulously, and whispered, "I am glad," and he took the broth.

In two days Sam Timmor was back on his feet. He left the lean-to room and moved down into the bunkhouse under Jason Kane's distasteful eyes. Mary Alice had insisted Jason Kane hire him. The foreman had at first hesitated and when the girl said she'd speak to her father about it, he'd shrugged. "I'll hire him."

So Sam Timmor took an end bunk in the Double O bunkhouse, got up in the cold dawn, built the fires, swept out the chuckhouse, pumped water for the home stock, milked the cows, and ate alone after the other men had saddled and left for the day's work on the range. It was an endless chore; the days rolled on. A week passed.

But Jason Kane didn't trust him. "Did you ever watch his eyes, Mary? That old codger is crazy as a bedbug."

"He's an old man who's been kicked and bullied around for years. He's drifted from place to place looking for work, I'll bet, and now is only looking for a place to die. He won't last long, not with those spells he has, and I think he is happy here and he is earning his keep. Let him stay, Jason. This winter anyway."

Jason Kane took a fresh chew, enigmatically.

"I'm only working for you people." He walked away.

Sam Timmor sensed these things, even if he didn't hear them in so many words. And his lips curled mirthlessly as he oiled his gun in the darkness of his bunk. If those people only knew! He wasn't staying here more'n two-three weeks. That was all he asked. Kane had said the cattle were cut out, ready for the selling. Tom Watson should be along soon. He'd be working up Thunder River now, buying for the company. It had taken Sam Timmor a long time to get on this last trail—Watson and Ruth had skipped all over the country; Watson was a rolling stone—but this last job was a steady one, and tucked in this corner, Sam had had a hard time getting trace of the two. But now soon it would be over and he could return to his box house and stock his range again. . . .

He sat hunched on the swill barrel one blustery windswept winter's night after feeding the hogs and the cold western sky was a wild mass of gold when a young man rode into the ranch yard, and Sam Timmon saw the girl come out and there was gladness in her greeting. Sam Timmor saw Jason Kane saunter from the corrals and, grinning, take the young man's horse. There were friendly words of banter between the two men then the foreman led the horse to the barn, and the girl and the newcomer went into the ranch house.

Later, from the bunkhouse, Sam Timmor saw the glass lamps in the parlor windows. They were burning with all the shine and brilliancy Mary Alice could put into them it seemed, with her rubbing, and Sam Timmor heard the cottage organ playing. The sound of her voice came muted through the closed doors and bright windows. It was a sweet sound and the old man in the bunkhouse crouched in his dark corner and shivered with memory and pain.

Ten days passed. Sam Timmor, in spite of listening to every word the men said, didn't hear anything about Tom Watson, the cattle buyer for the company, coming to cut out the beeves gathered in the north pasture. But he knew that the company cattle buyer passed on all stock, and knew also that these steers were waiting for fall shipment.

A full two weeks went by and Sam Timmor took the situation by the horns and faced Jason Kane. He had avoided Kane as much as possible; he knew the man wanted little to do with him, and he in turn was afraid of Kane's sharp eyes.

"Kane," he said. "How about them beeves? Aren't they to be sold? What're yuh hangin' onto them for?"

The foreman looked keenly down. "Yes, but there are more important things on this ranch to be done first."

"What?"

Jason Kane stared. "I don't know as it's any of your business," he said finally.

Sam knew he'd overstepped his bounds. He tried to make his crackly voice sound casual.

"I reckon not, but don't yuh have a cattle buyer come through here sometimes an' sorta check your stuff?"

There! It was out! He held his breath.

"Yes," Kane said. "Old Tom Watson used to come through."

"Used to?" Sam Timmor fought to control his voice, but it quavered. "Doesn't he come any more?"

Jason Kane gave his habitual shrug. "Watson got killed coupla months ago. Gored by a bull down at the Dry Springs cattle pens. His kid might take over his business—"

Sam Timmor wasn't listening. The yellow haze was wavering before his eyes. He fought it, and before it got the better of him he stumbled to the bunkhouse and onto his blankets.

Tom Watson was dead.

IT TOOK two days this time for him to get over his "spell" as he called it later. The cowboys gruffly brought in his grub and tended to him, cussing among themselves. "The old drifter. Crazy as a galoot. Lissen to him rave." But they cared for him.

When Sam Timmor finally came out of it, he knew he was different. Not better, worse. The yellow waves were dancing almost continually before his eyes now—as he split the pine kindling, as he swilled the pigs, as he put his thin grayed head against the roan cow's flanks and milked her. Crazy? He wanted to say it, to shout it and laugh aloud. Thirty long years chasing after Tom Watson and Ruth, wanting to kill them, and they running, eluding him all the time, so it seemed. And now Watson was dead. Ruth had died years ago. He didn't think of her any more, but of Watson, the man who had destroyed his life and swept aside all the dreams he'd had for himself and Ruth and the Montana ranch. . . . The yellow waves danced.

He had wanted a cottage organ, too, and shiny glass lamps in windows, and a horsehair sofa as Mary Alice had, on which to entertain her young beau. He had wanted steel engravings on the wall and a soft Brussels carpet on the floor just as Bugle Armstrong had. He could have been as rich as Bugle Armstrong. . . .

Sam Timmor shuffled his feet in the straw and pulled at the cow's teats and the yellow curtains undulated before his half-closed eyes. *Tom Watson . . . Tom Watson. . . .*

He was a little unsure of how many days passed before it gradually came to his con-

sciousness that Mary Alice was going to get married. Then he realized it was the important thing Jason Kane had mentioned was to take place. The wedding was to be soon. He heard the boys talking about it. A big dance at The Forks, barrels of beer and plenty of hard stuff—old Bugle was really putting out. The biggest thing the basin ever saw.

Sam Timmor had moments when he felt fierce elation for Mary Alice. She was pretty and sweet and gentle. She was like a lamb. Hadn't she taken him in that first day?

And then there were times when ugliness would come over him at the thought of happiness for a boy and girl who were going to get married. And that he had missed such happiness. Missed it because of the treachery of a man for whom he'd done everything.

Sam Timmor no longer thought of his gun. His warped mind drifted. He had thoughts of his great house, of a cottage organ, of a girl singing. He dreamed of shooting at a man and seeing terror in the man's eyes as the man recognized him. His gun bucked in his hand again and again. Blood showed on the man's shirt, then his vest. The man was dead. Tom Watson was dead. Tom Watson was—

His mind jerked back. Tom Watson *was* dead. Sam Timmor would clamber to the top board of the pigsty and hunch there. *Dead. Gored by a bull in the cattle yards at Dry Springs.*

Sam Timmor, the pig man, slowly went crazier as the days slipped past.

Then Bugle Armstrong, himself, told Sam Timmor about it. The big rancher stopped him one day in the yard. Sam Timmor was carrying stove wood across the yard for the chuck house; his mackinaw was in rags, his levis stiff with dirt and filth.

"Old-timer," the rancher said not unkindly. "Mary Alice is getting married come next Tuesday and I want all my boys dressed up for the wedding. I don't reckon you've got a change so I'm having Watson bring out a new outfit for you tomorrow. How'll that set with you? New jacket, overalls, red shirt—" Armstrong put a big hand on the ragged shoulder and shook Sam Timmor.

But Sam Timmor wasn't hearing. From beneath the floppy hat the yellow, wrinkle-bedded eyes sought the rancher's face. The lip corners twitched.

"Who'll bring out the duds?" he whispered.

"Watson. Young Watson, the man who's going to wed Mary Alice. You've seen him around here, evenings. Old Tom Watson's boy. Slim, quick, good-lookin' kid with dark hair."

The splintery pine chunks bit into Sam Timmor's raw, cold-chapped hands. He squeezed the eagerness from his voice. The harsh cackly voice sounded almost as usual.

"So Tom Watson's boy is going to get married."

"Sure. Why not?" Armstrong was puzzled at the slow incredulity.

Sam Timmor said slowly, "I once knew Tom. Yes, I did. And now his boy—"

He wanted to laugh, to lie down and hold his sides and die from laughing, but he just held the wood in his ragged, stiff arms and looked up at Bugle Armstrong, the rich rancher like he could have been, and his yellow eyes jerked around. He said, "I'm sure I'll be much obliged to Tom Watson's boy to be bringin' me a new outfit for his wedding. For that, I'm sure." And then he did laugh, suddenly, jerkily, with a wild note. He stopped it almost instantly. "He'll be coming from Thunderville by the north trail, I reckon?"

Bugle Armstrong nodded, but stared. "I suppose he will," he said and he didn't know he was saying words. His eyes were on Sam Timmor's wrinkled yellow eyes and then he knew Jason Kane was right. The man was stark mad.

SAM TIMMOR knew what he was going to do. It wasn't like meeting Tom Watson, but the flavor would be there; this man was a Watson. He went to the bunkhouse, strapped on his .45 and saddled his horse, which had fared better than its master for the stay on the Double O. In the late afternoon sunlight Sam Timmor rode toward the north trail to Thunderville.

He rose above the cup of the valley. As he hunched along in the saddle, bent against the stiff wind coming off the pine tops below, he said to himself, *I can't shoot him down. That would not be right, killed by a man whom he didn't know, and for why he wouldn't know. And it wouldn't do any good to tell young Watson. No, that would do no good.*

But Sam Timmor decided one thing. Young Watson had to die. That was the thing he knew he was going to do—kill the son of the man who had wronged him!

But how?

He approached the narrow gorge he'd come down that first day, and he halted his horse. Here would be a good place. He looked up at rocks imbedded in scrub pine roots and thorn brambles. In places where sunlight had struck thorny roses had managed to take root among the rocks and mosses. The roses had long since fallen; now their green haws were turning red. Their small prettiness looked ironic in that bleakness of rock and shale and brown pine root.

Sam Timmor achingly got off his horse. Already a plan was forming in his warped mind. He clambered painfully up one side of the trail and looked down, and his lips twitched. It would not be much of a trick. A

little backwork, a pine trigger, a wire brought from the ranch. . . .

He set to work.

His hands were bleeding when low-scudding clouds brought early twilight. Sharp-edged granite and thorn bushes had taken their toll, and his aged body was shaking as he scrambled and half fell from his handiwork to the thicket where he'd tethered his horse. A fever was in his bones and the yellow curtains were flaunting their hazy fingers before his eyes. He knew he was on the brink of one of his "spells" and he whipped the horse to get back to the ranch. He had to get to bed, to rest. Tomorrow Tom Watson's boy was coming down that trail. And Sam Timmor had much more to do.

He fought the chill in his withered shoulders. His blue lips kept saying over and over, "Tom Watson's boy. He won't know anything. He won't know anything. It's best that way. Best for me too."

Jason Kane and the boys saw him ride in. They had eaten. Kane strolled over, toothpick in his hard lips. "You're late for chorin'. Where were you?"

Sam Timmor saw the sharp eyes. He put his bleeding hands into his ragged pockets. "N'place," he mumbled and went into the barn.

He slept in a horse stall that night. He knew he might have one of his lapses and talk, and he didn't want anyone to hear his thoughts and plans. For long hours he lay there awake, shivering in the two horse blankets he'd wrapped around him. He listened to the barn creaking in the raw wind blasts. The world outside was cold, cruel. In here the sounds of the horses stamping, eating, were comforting; their bodies warmed the place and his withered body inside the blankets also grew warm. He fell asleep.

Jason Kane and the men didn't leave as early as usual the next morning. Sam Timmor grew into a fever of anxiety. But finally they left with a wagon, wire and fence poles for the west line camp, and Sam Timmor almost ran for the barn to saddle his horse.

He had found a wire of the correct thinness and strength in the blacksmith shop and now, sliding an axe under his saddle blanket, he sneaked back of the barn, around the smithy and cut through the timber, out of sight of the house. He hit the north trail, galloping. He didn't know what time Watson's son would be along but it probably would be this morning and he still had a lot of work to do. He arrived at the gorge sweating.

He had fashioned scores of triggers for log falls up in Montana—when a man was out of powder in the old days, it was the only way one could get game—and it was as easy to kill a bear as a rabbit. It merely depended upon the size of the log or rock fall. Sam Timmor began to finish what he had started yesterday.

When he had finished he looked up. A tangle of huge rocks balanced precariously in the shadow of a pine clump. A pine log held the edge of the mass and that in turn was balanced by a small shaven stick. Sam Timmor had the wire fastened around this shaven stick; now he dropped over the rock shelf and with the aid of small stones he threaded the wire across the narrow trail. He kept it about the height of a horse's fetlock. Then he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork.

From the up-side of the trail where there was a light bend in the gorge, the mass of rock would not be noticed until the rider was beneath it; then it would be too late.

Sam Timmor's lips twitched. He gathered up his axe and the few chips that had fallen to the trail. He flung chips into the brush and threw the axe over the side of the trail into a crevasse. It was high noon and anyone coming in from Thunderville would be along any minute now. He looked at the wire, almost invisible in the gray day, and he laughed shortly. When the rocks had rumbled down he'd ride over them for the outside world and disappear. The pigs of the Double O would see him no more, the pine kindling, the roan, balky cow, the stinky sty—only the horses in the barn would he miss, but maybe he'd go back to the great house in Montana. He'd have horses there on his four square sections. And then again, maybe he'd just drift. . . .

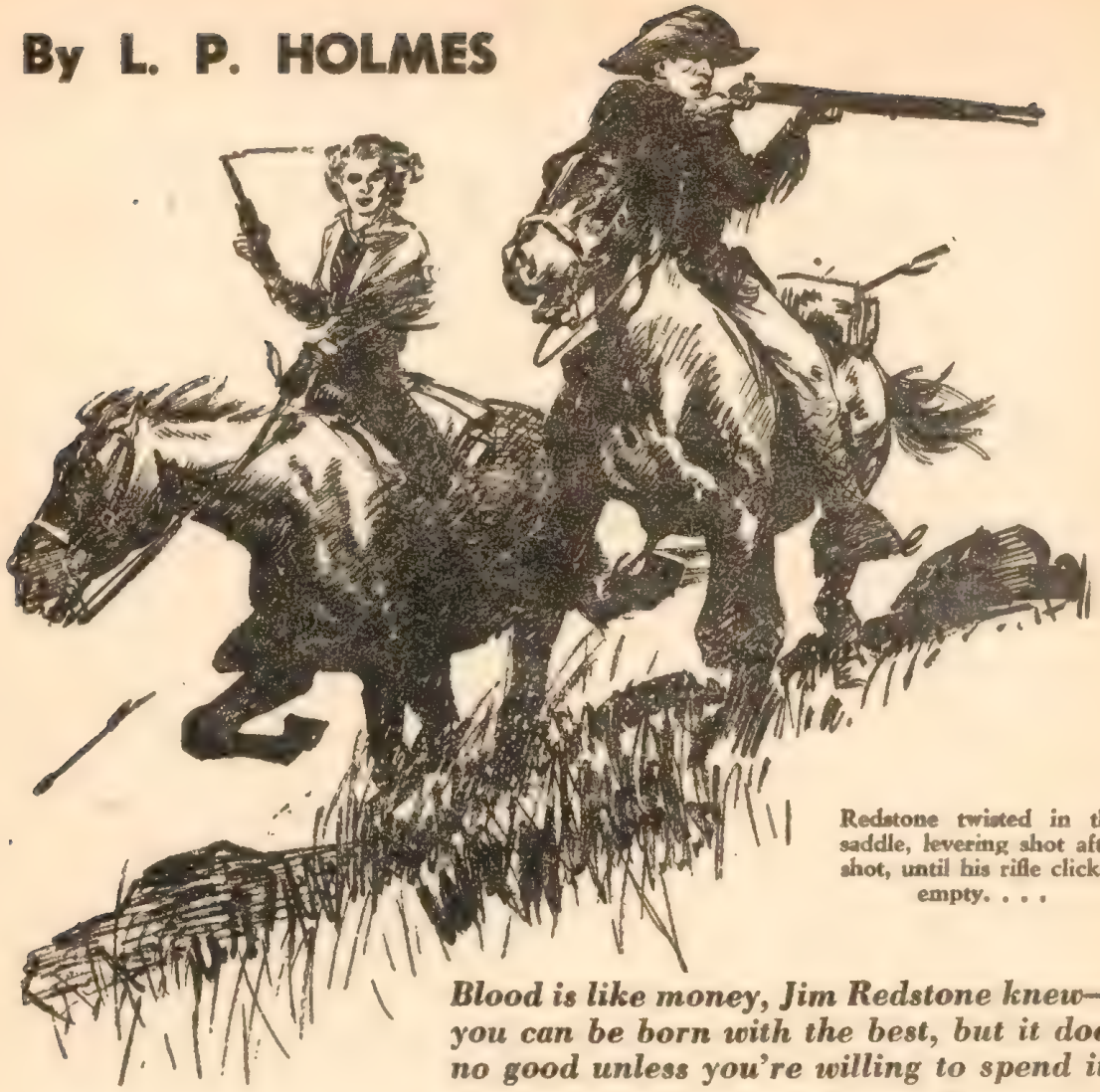
HE SAT in a vantage post between two cedar roots, a hundred paces down the trail. He was twenty feet up on the bank in line with the long gorge and he could see for twenty rods the approach to his strung wire. He knew his trap would not fail.

The storm that had threatened late yesterday was breaking in the mountains. The wind was coming down into the foothills and rain was curtaining the reaches and peaks toward the north. Sam Timmor crouched among the cedar roots, and the wind rushed down the gorge lashing the pine and brush until all ordinary sounds were blotted out. It shook the brown roots, whipping the sand from their tendrils into the holes of his mackinaw and down his neck, and his bowed, skinny legs kicked and twisted as he sought to get out of its cold blast. He tried to watch the trail ahead but the wind brought water to his yellow eyes. He cursed it. He wanted to see, and he rubbed his grimy, sandy knuckles into his eyes and they hurt all the more.

He heard a sound ahead and his hunched spine stiffened, for the sound was sharp and unmistakable—shod hoofs against rock.

(Continued on page 123)

By L. P. HOLMES



Redstone twisted in the saddle, levering shot after shot, until his rifle clicked empty. . . .

Blood is like money, Jim Redstone knew—you can be born with the best, but it does no good unless you're willing to spend it!

HE LAY on the flat of his lean stomach between the edge of a thicket of mesquite and the low, ragged shoulder of a stretch of slab rock. Using the lift of his elbows he propped head and shoulders high enough to let the keen fixity of his glance run across the slab rock, which lay open and faintly glowing under the light of the Arizona stars.

The Mescalero Apache was out there, not far away. Not by sight or sound did Jim Redstone know this. It was something else, a feral rippling across his nerve ends, a hard and biting instinct, a cold and poised ferocity that built up in him whenever the Apache was close by.

Beyond the far edge of the slab rock lifted the gaunt column of a sahuaro cactus. The faintest of movement in the shadow of it riveted Redstone's glance. It was an Apache, small, crouched, deadly as a side-winder, materializing, it seemed, out of nothing more substantial than the touchless woof of the starlight.

Wise in the way of starlight and shadow, Redstone knew that the bulking gloom of the mesquite thicket behind him gave him complete obscurity. So he waited, utterly still, watching. For several long moments the warrior did not move again. He was like some wary animal searching for prey, alert, wild, avid—keening the night with every probing sense.

At long last the Mescalero left the protective shadow of the sahuaro and came across the slab rock, noiseless as a slithering serpent. By imperceptible fractions of an inch, Redstone's head sank lower and lower. Unless the warrior changed direction he would come off the slab rock directly over the spot where Redstone lay hidden. Redstone flexed his right arm, waited, peering upward.

At the very edge of the slab rock the Apache paused, a wild figure against the stars, clad

APACHE——SHADOWS

only in breech clout and moccasins, and with a thin strip of calico as a head band. His face, hard and implacable as obsidian, was lifted so that he could stare across the night to the west and south where lay Barrett's Meadow.

The Apache dropped off the edge of the slab rock, a moccasined heel brushing Redstone's shoulder. Uncoiling with a smooth surge of relentless power, Redstone lunged up, caught the Mescalero by the throat, pinching back the startled cry to a thin, almost soundless hiss.

Redstone pulled the warrior under him, using the full weight of his body to muffle all struggle, the drive of his fingers going ever deeper and deeper into the Mescalero's throat. He could feel the warrior's torso arching up against his greater weight and bulk, shaking in the terrible intensity of mortal effort. By perceptible degrees the effort lessened and the warrior went completely flaccid. Redstone kept the locked stricture of his fingers in place for a good minute longer, to make sure. Then he pushed the dead figure aside and began sliding backward, inch by inch, foot by foot, feeling his way around the mesquite thicket. Half an hour later he gave soft answer to Case Barrett's challenge and stepped into the warm shadow of Barrett's ramada.

"You were right, Case," he said. "The country is crawling with them to the east and north. I met up with a scout that was coming down to look you over. His report will be considerably delayed."

"Ha!" said Barrett. "They'll do no more than look. By the wagons they'll know that you and your skinners are here and the price they'd pay to clean us up would be more than they can stomach. You can wait them out, right here. Within a week they'll be scuttling back to the Corgadores. They've no wish to be cut off by the troops at Fort Wardell from their favorite hideout."

"The question is, do they know at Fort Wardell that Chino and his devils are out this way," said Tim Murtagh. "I'll have a try at getting the word through, if you say so, Jim."

"That will be my chore, if it's to be done," said Redstone. "Thanks just the same, Tim."

There was a stir in the far, dark corner of the ramada where the girl had sat quietly ever since the wagons had pulled in at Barrett's Meadow just before dusk. Now she came over and laid a hand on Redstone's arm. "You'll take me with you?"

Redstone made his reply purposely harsh. "You don't realize what you are asking—what's out there. You saw what they did to Stillman at Mud Valley?"

"Yes. But you know why I must get to Fort Wardell as quickly as possible. Already there has been much time lost. Too much. And now to wait another week—" she choked a little.

"Redstone is right, Miss McCrae," said Case Barrett. "The country between here and Fort Wardell right now is no place for a white woman—no place at all."

The girl did not seem to hear Barrett. She went on, directly to Redstone. "In the old days my father trusted you, trusted you utterly. More than once I've heard him say you were the one man in all the Southwest who knew the Apache mind better than the Apache himself. If he were here now, he would give his consent. He would say that you take me with you. But he isn't here. He is at Fort Wardell, dying. And he needs me. You never failed Colonel Angus McCrae in the old days, Jim Redstone. Don't fail him, now."

Redstone made a restless, almost violent motion. "Colonel Angus McCrae is a soldier and his personal feelings would have nothing to do with his decision. He would order the right thing done. And the right thing is that you stay here, in safety, until the troops get through."

The girl said, "He is an old man, and lonely. You speak of the right thing—in my heart I know what is the right thing. It is that I get to his bedside—quickly. Take me with you."

The silence ran, hot and thick, across the ramada. Over against the far wall, a shapeless bulk in the gloom, Case Barrett's Maricopa squaw crouched, utterly still. Redstone's three skinners, Murtagh, Kelly and Bissonette were wordless, knowing that this was Jim Redstone's decision to make.

Case Barrett knew it, too, so he said nothing more.

The girl was a slender shape before him and with her hand on his arm and the fixed, burning intensity of her eyes she held his every attention.

"It would," he said gruffly, "besides the Apaches, mean from eighteen to twenty hours of steady riding. It would mean heat and thirst and weariness to tear your heart out. It would mean all that, at best. And at the worst—"

"Back at Wickenburg I told you I would accept every hardship, every danger and that there would be no complaint. I have kept my word, haven't I?"

"You would have to get out of those woman's clothes, wear jeans, shirt, boots. Two men would be bait enough for Chino. While a woman, a white one—that hair of yours. I don't know how we could hide it all."

She scurried over to where her meagre luggage lay and was soon back, thrusting a pair of shears into Redstone's hand. "Cut it off," she ordered. "Cut it short."

It was the same glorious, flaxen crown that had made him marvel, back in the old days when he was a trooper in the Third Cavalry, and she was the colonel's daughter. Now it lay in his hand, thick, luxurious, silken.

She sensed his hesitation. "It will grow again," she said softly.

Redstone worked the shears, almost roughly. He turned to Barrett. "Your two best horses, Case. And every sane man in Arizona will curse me as a fool."

"Perhaps," murmured Tim Murtagh. "But a human one."

Redstone went out with Case Barrett to saddle the horses and make other preparations for the ride.

THEY swung south and east into the desert. Redstone set a fast pace for two reasons. One was to cover as many miles as possible through the comparative coolness of the night, the other to get well clear of Barrett's Meadow as soon as possible. For the Mescaleros would be finding their dead scout, might guess this new move and ride to check it.

This thing had started back at Wickenburg. It had been no plan of Jim Redstone's to carry a passenger with him over the long, bitter miles of the freight haul from Wickenburg to Fort Wardell, particularly such a passenger as Joyce McCrae. There was responsibility enough with the wagons, their loads, his skinners and himself, without adding the safety of a passenger, a young lady passenger. So he had vehemently told Mike Volper. That was before he had seen who the passenger was to be.

"She missed by a day going out with Rhett Stillman," said Volper. "She is Colonel McCrae's daughter, Jim. And she says that her father is dying. Which is true enough, from the talk I've heard. It's an old wound by a Mescalero arrow, that he's been fighting for months. And it is getting the best of him. They sent word to her at Yuma. She wants to get to him before the end. I know how you feel, but what are we to do? You can't ignore a plea like that."

This was Redstone's first trip to Fort Wardell in the best part of a year. He'd been hauling between Wickenburg and the Colorado River landings since the previous fall. And here, on his first trip farther inland in long months, there was this girl to take along. Colonel McCrae's daughter.

It had been with strange mixture of emotions that he had faced her. She had not changed a great deal from the old days. More the mature young woman, of course, less the lithe and stripling girl in her late 'teens. And with the fixed gravity of impending sorrow in her clear eyes and about her soft, sensitive lips—lips that had parted so easily in bright, melodious laughter to echo across the parade ground at Fort Huachuca and make lonely troopers pause and listen wistfully.

It had been something of a shock to Jim Redstone to realize now, at this renewed sight of her, that he had not been so successful in forgetting as he had hoped. Some memories might mellow with time, but they would never leave a man entirely.

She had called him by name instantly, which showed that she had not forgotten, either. But the old obstacle was still there, as it ever would be. She was still the colonel's daughter, and Army caste was strong. Where he had been just another trooper in the Third, now he was a dusty, sun-blackened, rough wagon freighter.

He had taken her along, of course. There was, as Mike Volper had said, nothing else to do. He had done what he could for her in the way of frugal comforts and she had thanked him with a grave, faint smile. Her stoicism against the grinding weariness of the wagons had excited the admiration not only of himself, but of Murtagh and Kelly and Bissonette, as well as the crew's.

At Mud Valley, half a day from Barrett's Meadow, they had come up with all that remained of Rhett Stillman, his wagons and his skinners. The wagons were blackened embers, still giving over a thin, acrid smoke. They had scratched out shallow graves for Stillman and his men and buried them with Mescalero arrows still in them. All the mules lay dead in their traces and the buzzards and coyotes would feast.

And this was the first hint that Chino and his Apache cohorts were out and raiding between them and Fort Wardell. He would not have liked that, even without the girl.

SO NOW, here they were, the two of them, riding through the spectral, star-garrisoned beauty of the desert night, while Jim Redstone scanned every bank of shadow with a trained exactitude that weighed and balanced every possibility of Apache guile and slinking attack. And how well he knew the full measure of the danger that rode at their shoulders.

An hour before dawn they made short halt. Redstone split a measure of grain between the two horses. There was cold bacon and tack for the girl and himself, washed down with a swallow of water from a canteen. Due north lifted Desolation Peak, gaunt, lonely and forbidding, black against the sky. They went on through the false, then the true dawn, which spread the desert about them in chill, steel-gray.

The sun came up and clubbed them. Redstone stole a measuring look at the girl and saw that the weight of fatigue was already putting a little droop to her shoulders, pinching the softness about her mouth. He clucked silent sympathy for her, knowing what lay ahead. But there could be no stopping now. Black, avid savage eyes would be searching the desert for them from the gaunt shoulders of Desolation Peak.

He swung wide and far from Desolation, trusting that distance and the neutral coloring of the horses and of the garb he and the girl wore, would help hide them. He used every shred of cover he could. But there was always a thin filament of dust lifting and following from the churning hoofs of the horses. And well he knew the eagle reach of Apache eyes.

He rode silent and slouched in his saddle, a tall man, burned black by desert sun, all bone and sinew, every ounce of surplus flesh long since dried and sweated from him. The loneliness of desert years had fixed his lean face with habitual taciturn reserve, but there was still youth and a strong tide of energy in the cool, clear alertness of his gray eyes.

Jim Redstone's knowledge of the desert and its ways went back to when he was a gangling kid of fifteen. The massacre had taken place in the shadow of the Dragoon Mountains, a massacre that had cost him both parents, a younger sister and all the other members of the wagon train that had worked a laborious way west from Texas.

Redstone had been the only survivor, and that because one of the first arrows fired by the attacking Apache had ripped a gash across his head, dropping him stunned and bleeding into a thicket of mesquite beside the bloody trail. There he had lain, sick and helpless while the wagon train fought its way a desperate half mile farther along before meeting final destruction.

A troop of the Third Cavalry, arriving just too late to save the others, had found Redstone and taken him to Fort Huachuca where he had recovered and worked as a civilian, until old enough to enlist. He served a hitch but refused to consider another, because of his feud with Lieutenant Caswell. He had, however, gone on as a scout for the Third, until that same feud forced him to resign.

Colonel McCrae had argued for hours, trying to get him to change his mind and, when every argument failed, had remarked bitterly that he could better afford to lose a whole troop of cavalry than he could the services of such an expert scout as Jim Redstone.

The feud with Lieutenant Caswell had started when faulty judgment on Caswell's part had led to disastrous losses to a troop in a brush with Chino's Mescaleros. Of the survivors, the older troopers, to whom the Army was their life, wisely kept their mouths shut. Not so Jim Redstone. The fiery youth in him proclaimed the facts and these facts brought a severe reprimand to Caswell, who, from that moment forward, hated Redstone bitterly.

Then, also, there was Colonel McCrae's flaxen-haired, stripling daughter, with her bright, gay youth, who bestowed her smiles equally upon the black-haired young Texan trooper and the handsome Lieutenant Caswell. Jim Redstone learned the hard way that there was a difference in Army stature here, that he could not overcome. When the final day of his enlistment ran out, he felt like a man relieved of heavy chains.

There was much of the life which he had liked and he had many friends among the sun-blackened, hard bitten troopers, but he had left, determined to put it all behind him. He had found now that a man could separate himself from the physical, but not the mental. If a memory was strong enough, it could claim part of him forever. His memory of Joyce McCrae was such.

They had turned due north, now, and in the far, burning distance a line of dark, low rim showed. Under that rim lay the buildings and parade ground of Fort Wardell. Under it lay rest and safety for this girl in Redstone's charge—and the shadowy hand of death which she was trying to outrace.

That race was exacting its price. There was no mercy in this desert sun and the distance which lay in miles was a fixed thing, which no man could shorten. You could count it out in the plodding strides of a horse or the roll of a wagon wheel, but you could not make it less by even one short inch. And the sun and those miles were working relentlessly on the girl. They beat the jauntiness from her shoulders, thinned her face and wracked her slender strength.

It was no good talking about it. Talk took energy and she would need every ounce of hers

for riding. Redstone felt a deep and gentle sympathy, but showed none at all, for that also would be a mistake. Sympathy at the wrong time could weaken the will, cause a break in the armor of pride. His only outward gesture of concern was to drop back beside her at intervals and see that she drank from the canteen he offered.

Once she objected, her voice dry and thin, half whispering. "I've watched. You haven't taken a drop, yourself."

"I don't need it," was Redstone's harsh reply. "You do, and the horses will, later. Drink!"

Not that thirst did not torment him. It did, pulling at his throat with a bitter, thickening insistence. But he had been through hours like this many times before and was conditioned to them both in mind and body. He knew, with fine exactitude, his limits, and was as yet not anywhere near them.

The sun blazed its merciless way to the meridian, grudgingly declined. The horses, full of go the night before, were listless now, gaunted so that Redstone called a short halt to tighten the cinches. There would, he felt sure, be cause for a period of running, later on, and a loosened saddle girth could be the measure between life and death. A man, to go on living in this country, had to think ahead and consider every possibility.

From the eastern flank of Desolation Peak a ridge ran out, tapering down to a thin, persistent tongue of broken slab rock, clotted with mesquite, spiked with gaunt sahuaro cactus. It marked a barrier between them and Fort Wardell. They could ride about the eastern reach of it, but that meant added miles that were not in the horses, nor in the girl's ability to hold up. And the physical barrier of the low ridge was nothing, if the Apaches did not get there in time to cover all of it.

Redstone had been watching the flank of Desolation Peak. Untrained eyes could have made nothing of his survey. But Redstone saw and understood. The faintest dust haze at times, and once the brief, reflected glitter of metal. Apaches were aiming for that barrier and so now it was just a question of who would get there first.

REDSTONE called halt again. There was a gallon canteen of water hung to his saddle horn that had not been touched. He took the bridle from each horse in turn, so that they would not waste a single precious drop because of an obstructing bit. He split that gallon of water evenly, pouring it into the crown of his hat for the horses to suck up greedily.

He threw the canteen away to be rid of its empty weight. He put the bridles back on. He stood, looking up at the girl and his words came, harsh and curt.

"We can make no mistakes from here on in. You will ride on my right. You will keep even with me. You will pay attention to nothing but keeping your horse on its feet and yourself in the saddle. If anything should stop me, you are to go on, as fast as you can ride. Fort Wardell is dead ahead, beyond that low, broken ridge. Above everything you are to go on! Understand?"

Staring down at him with hollowed, sun fevered eyes, she nodded. Redstone pulled a revolver from his belt, pushed it into her hands. "If the worst comes, use the last shot on yourself."

He saw her hands begin to shake, her lips quiver, glimpsed the surge of terror darkening her eyes. Hysteria was close and could be fatal. He reached up and caught her by the shoulder, deliberately driving his fingers deep into her soft flesh, hurting her physically. His words and tone were just as deliberate.

"It was part of the bargain you made. That you'd accept the risks, that you wouldn't weaken or quit. Don't turn coward on me now. Stop your damned sniveling!"

He saw the terror shadow in her eyes burn out before the flame of quick, aroused anger, and knew that his tactics had worked. There would be no hysteria now. As Redstone turned and swung into his saddle she was rubbing her bruised shoulder where his fingers had gripped.

She did as she was told. She rode on his right and she kept even with him as he lifted his horse to a trot. Half a measure of grain, far back in the dawn. Half a gallon of water, now. In the desert a man had to gauge things that closely in calculating distance and energy and the call for ultimate effort.

Redstone drew the rifle from the scabbard under his knee. He cracked the action to make sure it was loaded and ready. He rested the weapon across his saddle. He snarled at the girl. "Run your horse—now!"

They hit the first lift of the low ridge that way. Redstone's eyes fixed to his left, stabbing and searching. He saw them racing in, coming down the slope of the ridge from Desolation, small, wiry and bare-torsoed figures, hunched on their laboring ponies—fully a score of them.

Too far for shooting, yet. For that matter, though shooting would ultimately help, the basic measure of this thing was something else. It was speed and distance. It was a few mouthfuls of grain and half a gallon of water each for a pair of laboring horses.

A hundred yards from the crest, the first Apache lead winged by and Redstone set himself to answer it. Not wildly, but with calculated deliberation. Under the conditions Red-

stone knew that to reach one target in five shots would be good shooting. He outdid himself. In five shots he got one warrior and one horse. He plugged five fresh cartridges into the loading gate of his rifle. He measured distance and saw that they would reach the crest a scant hundred yards before the Apaches could block it. If their horses were not hit—

It was not the few guns the Apaches carried that Redstone feared as much as the arrows. These guns had been taken from massacred settlers, from ambushed wagon men like Rhett Stillman. They could be deadly, of course, yet they were still foreign to Apache hands. But the short, powerful bow and the hissing feather winged arrow was, within range, still the natural weapon for them.

The yards to the ridge top were shortening. The oncoming Mescaleros, to get past an upthrust backbone of slab rock, bunched momentarily. Redstone hammered the massed target with cold deadliness, saw horses and warriors go down under his flailing lead.

He looked at the girl and cursed desperately as he saw the Mescalero rise out of the mesquite just ahead of her. How this Apache had gotten this far out ahead of the others, Redstone could not tell. The warrior was afoot and drawing an arrow to its head, beady eyes fixed on the girl with a single-minded savagery that was blood chilling.

Redstone knew he could never swing his rifle on the Apache in time. He did not have to. The girl pushed forward the revolver he had given her, and its report pounded in a short, flat thud. The warrior staggered before the smash of the bullet and all the wiry, intent power was snuffed from him in that single, bitter instant. The arrow fluttered wild and harmless and then the warrior was down in a writhing, tangled heap, not unlike a dying snake. Then they were fully past him and the horses were topping the ridge in grunting, lunging leaps.

Redstone twisted in his saddle, levering shot after shot, until his rifle clicked empty. His shots had some effect, but he did not measure results closely, for they no longer mattered. The thin, scalding howl that came from Mescalero throats told the full measure of the failure to block the ridge. It had been close, desperately, deadly close, but failure it was. For it was down hill now for Redstone and the girl, and their horses had it in them to draw away.

From the shortening distance ahead lifted the pealing golden notes of a bugle. Redstone looked back and the ridge was empty. The Apaches had heard that bugle, too. The dust of their retreat would trace a trail back to the barren ruggedness of Desolation.

Redstone swung close to the girl. She was hunched low in her saddle, clinging to the horn with both hands. She was sobbing in a deep, shuddering way, swaying in utter physical and nervous exhaustion. Redstone slid a gentle arm about her, steadying her, slowing the lathered horses to a walk.

THE parade ground was a flat, black rectangle under the stars, and the smell of it was of dust, beaten and parched by a ravening sun that had been, and would return. Lights burned dull gold in the open windows and doors of the officer's quarters on the far side of the parade and in the trooper's barracks on this, the west side. If a man's eyes were keen and he knew where to look, he could make out the thin, dark line of the flagpole, climbing against the stars to the north.

Jim Redstone, pipe clenched solidly between his teeth, squatted in the black shadow of the remount stables, along with Sergeant Mike O'Malley and scout Ollie Bascom. Shortly before, a mounted troop had clattered away into the night, to open the trail to Barrett's Meadow and escort Redstone's waiting wagons on to the Fort.

Redstone had soldiered under Mike O'Malley back in the old days and had worked out many a dangerous scouting trail with Ollie Bascom. The three had talked of old times, but now had fallen silent with their pipes and their thoughts. To Redstone's question concerning Colonel McCrae, Mike O'Malley had said, "There's no chance. 'Tis a miracle he has stayed with us this long. Word has come out that he vowed he'd hang on until he'd once more seen and spoken to that lass of his. A fighting man always, he has done that. But now—"

To Jim Redstone it seemed that all the fort was doing what he and these two old friends were—waiting and remembering. Waiting for the word of death and remembering the man as he had lived. A rough, gruff old martinet, but a soldier's soldier and well loved as such.

Later, Redstone lay on a spare bunk in the hostler's quarters and listened to tattoo. Then later, taps. After which he slept.

In the gray dawn it came, on the notes of reveille; the call was muted and lugubrious, lacking in its usual bright and quickening staccato. So the stirring garrison knew, and faced the day with the sober knowledge of loss.

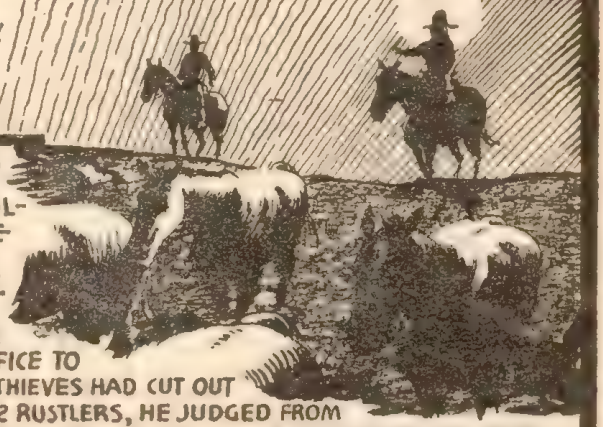
It was a soldier's burial. Long lines of mounted troopers with colors dipped, there at the barren little fort cemetery. The flat, rolling crash of the volleys by the firing squad. The sobbing sadness of a final taps. The gruff, hushed commands, the tramp of hoofs and rattle of equipment as the troops wheeled and rode away.

(Continued on page 125)

TALES of the

by LEE

VISION of DEATH



IN HAYES CITY, KAN.--SPRAWLING, BRAWLING COWTOWN TERMINUS OF THE NEWLY BUILT KANSAS PACIFIC RAILROAD--WAS WRITTEN ONE OF THE MOST DRAMATIC AND INEXPLICABLE PAGES IN THE HISTORY OF THE OLD WEST.

LATE IN OCTOBER, 1875, A RANCHER RODE UP TO SHERIFF ALEX RAMSEY'S OFFICE TO REPORT THAT DURING THE NIGHT HORSE-THIEVES HAD CUT OUT 35 HEAD OF HIS BEST STOCK. THERE WERE 2 RUSTLERS, HE JUDGED FROM THE SIGNS, AND THEY HEADED TOWARD SMOKY HILL OR THE REPUBLICAN RIVER.

RAMSEY, FIRST HAYES CITY SHERIFF TO LIVE TO BE ELECTED A SECOND TIME, KISSED HIS WIFE AND 2 SMALL CHILDREN AND STARTED WITH DEPUTY FRANK SHEPHERD FOR SMOKY HILL AS THE MOST LIKELY PLACE TO INTERCEPT THE FUGITIVES.

AT MIDNIGHT MRS. RAMSEY'S SCREAMS AROUSED NEIGHBORS WHO RUSHED IN TO FIND THE SHERIFF'S WIFE WILD-EYED WITH TERROR.

OLD WEST

SHE HAD DREAMED, SHE TOLD THEM, OF SEEING HER HUSBAND AND SHEPHERD PURSUE THE RUSTLERS. SHOTS WERE FIRED. THREE MEN FELL. THEN SHE WAS RUNNING ALONG A ROAD TOWARD A COVERED WAGON. IN IT LAY THE BODY OF HER HUSBAND. EVERYTHING SEEMED SO REAL SHE KNEW IT MUST BE TRUE.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING SHE SET OUT IN A CARRIAGE AND AFTER 14 MILES MET A COVERED WAGON. IN IT WAS THE SHERIFF'S BODY.

SHEPHERD SADLY CONFIRMED THE REST OF MRS. RAMSEY'S DREAM.

THEY HAD SURPRISED THEIR QUARRY FINISHING A MEAL, HE SAID. LEAPING ON THEIR HORSES, THE RUSTLERS, ONE OF WHOM HE RECOGNIZED AS DUTCH PETE, A BADMAN AND KILLER, DASHED AWAY. WHEN THEY IGNORED COMMANDS TO HALT, RAMSEY SHOUTED: "I'LL TAKE DUTCH PETE! YOU TAKE THE OTHER!"

AT THE SAME MOMENT THE RUSTLERS SWUNG INTO THEIR SADDLES. FOUR SHOTS RANG OUT SIMULTANEOUSLY. DUTCH PETE TOPPLED FROM HIS HORSE, SHOT THROUGH THE HEART. THE OTHER BADMAN LURCHED, CLUNG DESPERATELY TO THE SADDLE HORN, THEN FELL MORTALLY WOUNDED.

SHEPHERD LOOKED AROUND TO SEE THE SHERIFF ON THE GROUND, A BULLET THROUGH THE BODY CLOSE TO THE HEART. HE ASSISTED RAMSEY TO A NEARBY RANCH WHERE, IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING THAT COULD BE DONE, THE SHERIFF DIED -- *ON THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT.*

There are two trails to every boothill—and a man with a price on his head does well to choose the longer one!

"I guess you don't understand," he said. "I'm worth a thousand to you. . . ."

TWO TRAILS TO BOOTHILL

MARK FRAVEL halted his blowing chestnut under the overhang of the rimrock and stepped down from the saddle with the slow heaviness of a man weighted with fatigue. He could feel his bones snap under the sudden relaxing of his spare, raw-boned frame; it was an almost sensuous delight to plant his feet on solid ground again and draw the kinks out of his arms in a deliberate, luxurious stretch.

He hobbled the horse near a stand of bunch grass in the shade of the rock and went around and up to where the granite protruberance pitched angularly skyward, building its gray, uncompromising silhouette against the green monotony of the mesa. At the top he flattened out on his belly and his blue, remote eyes, pale as faded denim, scanned the valley in a long and searching study. In the cuts and draws, Loose Wheel Creek sauntered randomly, flashing with a glassy brilliance in the dazzling sunlight. The trail through the valley appeared

By KENNETH FOWLER

deserted, but farther north, where it blurred imperceptibly into the yawning chasm of Bent Bow Canyon, there was a gray smudge that might have been a cloud—if it wasn't dust churned up by oncoming riders. And riders might mean—anything.

Mark Fravel came down from the rimrock and stood for a moment watching the chestnut crop voraciously at the bunch grass where he had left it hobbled. The bright green juice that trickled from the animal's rolled-back lips was an acute reminder to him of the hunger gnawing at his own belly. Early this morning, back in the Scalplocks, he'd used up the last of his meager supply of coffee and jerky. He had not tasted food for more than twelve hours, and the swift, grabbing pains at the pit of his stomach were a warning, now, which he no longer dared ignore.

He took makings out of the pocket of his gray flannel shirt and mechanically built up a cigarette. He lit it and inhaled, but the smoke was like a hot streak drawn into his lungs, and after a few savorless puffs he flung it down and ground it out irritably under a heel of his boot.

His pale, squinted eyes swept the horizon again. The gray smudge in the distance was swelling ominously, and now there was no longer any doubt in him. It wasn't a cloud; it was dust. It was dust chopped up by horses' hoofs—many of them.

Mark Fravel swung his glance south, away from the ballooning dust; his eyes, for a second, were pinched and bleak, and his mouth, which was wide and had once been able to loosen into a smile, resembled now a sprung trap between the bunched muscles of his jaw.

South he could see the humps of shacks and soddies stretching away endlessly through the green valley watered by the creek. *Sodbusters,* he thought with bitter recollection. *And once, down in Oklahoma, I thought that was a way to live. I thought a roof and a plow and a woman were all a man needed to make a home.* Then, because he was fundamentally honest in his thinking, he let the bitter worm of doubt come wriggling through the core of the thought: *Maybe those are all a man needs.*

Abruptly he turned and unhobbled the horse. Maybe that wasn't the posse behind him. Maybe it was just another bunch of homesteaders rolling into the Bent Bow country.

It was a soothing thought, but he was not reassured by it. He was not reassured because he had learned, the hard way, not to expect too much out of life. He had learned that a man is a fool to put his whole trust in any fellow creature. And he had learned that a man who seeks to sink roots, who trustfully deposits all his dreams and dollars in one woman, in one piece of land, in one of anything, is double a fool, and a fool who will be doubly damned.

HIS LEAN jaw knotted; he gigged the chestnut down from the mesa, and a half hour later had reached the floor of the valley. The hunger in him now was a fierce and urgent thing; it was like something tearing at his belly with sharp, ravening claws. A sudden wave of nausea swept him, and with abrupt alarm, he realized he would have fallen from the saddle had he not made a quick, desperate clutch at the pommel.

"Got to eat," he muttered between clenched teeth; "got to eat damned quick," and he pricked the flagging chestnut with the spurs. But the horse, too, was almost out on its legs, and the knowledge hit him, then, that he wasn't going much farther today, maybe not much farther, ever. And what if he did get some food? What if he got some food and stole a fresh horse? There was only one trail open to him, and, sooner or later, he would reach the dead end. Guns would flame and roar, maybe soon, maybe not for some time yet, but at last he would have to face that final, inescapable blind alley, and mercifully the flame would blind him, and the roar would deafen him, and then there would be nothing. . . .

Abruptly, he cursed himself for a fool; at the same instant he stiffened alertly and sent his gaze ahead in a look of staring surprise. In this region, he had expected to find only crudely built soddies; but the house he saw ahead was built substantially of logs, with a well-cut doorway and panes of window glass glinting in the late afternoon sunlight.

Mark Fravel turned in the saddle and glanced back. There was no dust cloud now. But that, he knew, might merely mean that they had taken to the hills and were scouring the uplands. A faint hope reawakened in him as he swung his gaze back to the cabin. If he could get a horse here, and some grub, he might still make it. He might even have time for a short rest.

He was close enough now to see the neatly painted sign nailed above the wide plank doorway. It read:

S. Rainville
Tools & Provisions

Rainville. . . . Somewhere, in the dim recesses of his memory, the name struck a responsive chord. Yet he was sure he had never known any Rainvilles. He reached the door and slid from the saddle, almost falling. Then he had the chestnut hitched and was moving groggily up to the step. The door was open, and he walked in.

The room was dimly cool and inviting after the hot sun-glare of the trail, and for a moment he had trouble adjusting his eyes to its subdued light. Then he saw the sacks of seed racked along the left wall, and gradually other

objects took shape. He saw two new plows, their smooth handles smelling of fresh varnish, their gleaming, virginal blades ready for the promise of the earth and the fruition of the finished furrow. He saw axes and adzes and, on a long shelf above the tools, he saw something else, something upon which his starved eyes held with a fascinated fixity. The shelf supported a gleaming row of seal-tights—tinned meats, cans of peaches, tins of coffee.

Almost hypnotized by the sight, he didn't notice the short, thick-topped counter to his right, until the voice ran to him unexpectedly out of its shadows.

"We need another window, I guess." The voice was like the dim room; it was cool and deep and agreeable to the senses. "I'm over here, if you want anything."

Mark Fravel swung with a start. Then he saw her. She was behind the counter, and even in this half-light to which his eyes were still not wholly adjusted, he could see that she was pretty. She was, he judged, a little under his own age: twenty-eight, or twenty-nine, possibly. Her hair, which had an almost bluish gleam tinging its blackness, was brushed uncompromisingly back from a grave, quiet face and coiled in a thick braid at the nape of her neck. She was of medium height, but even with the ruffled apron she wore over her blue cotton dress he could define the graceful surge of her bosom above the slim secant of her waist.

He went over to the counter. He placed his hands on the counter, not because he felt awkward about his hands, but because he felt he needed support.

He said, "I wanted to buy a few things—kinda in a hurry."

It was in the knees he felt it first. First in the knees, and then, like a cut bank washing away in a flash flood, swiftly, all the way down his legs. The woman's eyes seemed to be growing bigger, suddenly; they were big and round and staring, like eyes seen in a nightmare and he felt his hands sliding away from the counter. A warm blanket of darkness was reaching for him, and he was in the blanket, falling, falling, and then there was nothing.

HE HAD no way of knowing how long it was before his eyes blinked open. Something cool and aromatic was tickling his nose, and he could feel the chilled pressure of something wet against his temples. Then he saw the white arm reaching down, and there was a tin cup and the low, cool voice was instructing him to drink.

He murmured: "Just—a little coffee and jerky—"

The voice went down to him with gentle firmness. "Drink this first. Then I'll get whatever you need."

The raw whiskey stung his throat, hit his belly like a cataract of flame.

"Now the broth, Julie," the woman called over her shoulder. "Hurry, Lover."

Then Mark Fravel saw the little girl. She was hardly more than a tot—four, maybe five. She had on a frilly blue dress, like her mother. She was standing over him, now, holding a yellow china bowl that gave off a hot, steamy fragrance. Her pudgy little hand gripped a big soup ladle.

"Not that spoon, Lover," the woman said. "A smaller one. Just a regular spoon."

The little girl came back with the spoon, and the woman dipped it in the steaming broth, and then he was sucking noisily, greedily, from it.

"Not too fast," the woman said warningly. "You've got to take it slowly, at first."

The broth was delicious. It was the most delicious thing Mark Fravel had ever tasted. It was a warm, steady current flowing through him, taking the shakiness out of him, rebuilding the vitality weakness and hunger had pilfered from his body.

He finished the broth, and stood up. He felt pleasantly warm inside from the whiskey and broth. He'd give his horse a quick feed and be on his way. He walked to the door, and his legs felt steadier under him now.

He looked out—and his long frame stiffened abruptly. The dust cloud was back on the horizon again. It looked like a dark, tumescent thunderhead boiling up from the earth. And it was rolling towards the cabin now, swiftly, ominously.

Mark Fravel stood like a man in the grip of a sudden paralysis; he didn't hear the woman as she came up behind him, and her cool, quiet voice startled him with its nearness.

She echoed his thought. "It's too late. You couldn't make it now," she said.

He spun around, facing her. "No, I couldn't make it," he agreed harshly. A heavy sigh went out of him. "Maybe it's just as well. They'd have caught up with me anyway, sooner or later."

"Maybe," the woman said quietly, "you give up too easily."

He had been looking out through the window again; now he jerked his head around. "What do you mean by that?"

She said, "Can you help me move this counter? There used to be a root cellar under here. You'll have to duck, going down."

He stared at her in abrupt astonishment. "I guess you don't understand," he said finally. "I'm worth a thousand dollars to you—if you turn me over to that posse."

She was struggling with the counter and, responding automatically, he went over to help her. He watched in dazed disbelief as she lifted the narrow trap door.

"Down there," she said. "You'd better hurry."

He put his foot on the top rung of the ladder, then turned, thrusting one last coldly inquisitive glance at her.

"If you want that thousand," he said, "you don't have to do this, you know. I won't run this time."

She had picked up a heavy wool mackinaw from the counter; she threw it across his arm, and there was a flash of anger in her gray eyes momentarily. "Here, put this on," she said sharply. "It might be chilly down there. I'll put your horse out in the lean-to. Everybody uses it. I doubt if they'll even look there."

He started slowly down the ladder. The trap door slammed down with a muffled thud. There was a dead finality in the sound. Then he could hear her straining to move the heavy counter back into place. She wasn't a very big woman. And the little girl wouldn't be much help.

He heard her voice, muffled by the heavy planking. "Julie, get mummy that crowbar over in the corner. Quick, Lover."

Dimly, he caught the patter of the little girl's feet scurrying across the room. Then came a crunching sound, of wood splintering, then a creak, and a sudden thud. The counter was back in place.

He ran his hands cautiously along the damp, mildewed walls. No windows. He was sealed up tighter than a drum. Well, if she wanted that thousand, she'd certainly be sure of it now. If she didn't want it, then there must be something else. Maybe she figured he had some stolen cash on him. Maybe she thought she could bleed him for more than a thousand. If so, the joke was on her. He had exactly ninety-seven dollars in the little poke rolled up inside his money belt.

Well, there was no way for a man to know what crazy, half-baked schemes might be rattling around in a woman's head. Women were temperamental, unpredictable creatures, governed by impulses and crazy instincts, rather than reason. Like Sarina. . . .

He thought of Sarina now, thought of the time he had first driven her out from Wharton to see his newly won quarter-section in the Cherokee Strip. He even remembered the dress she'd had on—a crisp white linen dress with puffy mutton-chop sleeves and a skirt that flared out in snowy billows from her dainty ankles. The gay blue parasol slanted jauntily across her shoulder had given her a pert air, and her blonde hair had looked like whipped taffy in its shade, but her red mouth had pouted sullenly when he had told her that, for the first year at least, they would have to live in a sod house.

"Me!" she had squealed in horrified protest. "Live in a dirt house? Why, Mark Fravel, that's the silliest thing I ever heard of!"

That had been the beginning. And the end had come, a few weeks later, when she had started going out with Tom Leto, who ran the prosperous Red Front Saloon and Dance Hall in Wharton. Mark Fravel had thought she would be as good as her word. She had promised to think it over about living in a sod-dy—"If you can build me a decent, respectable house in six months." But she hadn't. She had coyly egged him on, fascinated by her power over him, infatuated by his infatuation and feeding it on empty promises while she brazenly continued her flirtation with Tom Leto.

He had begun to drink. Then one night, desperate and lonely, he had gone to Tom Leto's office. And Tom Leto had laughed.

"Hell," Tom Leto had said, "if you can't hold your women, what am I supposed to do about it?"

He had leaped at Leto then, had gotten a stranglehold on his thick throat. And his grip was clamping tighter, tighter, when Leto had managed to get the gun out of his pocket. He had dropped his hands, then, and they had struggled for the gun. And while he was trying to wrest it away it had gone off, and Tom Leto had slumped back in his chair, his ruddy face blanched, blood petaling out on his white broadcloth shirt front into a noxious scarlet lily.

There was nothing to do, then, but run. And he had been running ever since.

A SOUND of hoofbeats jerked him taut, snapped his thoughts abruptly back to the present. A horse nickered, very close; then came a sound of trampling feet and the door opened. Next the feet were thumping hollowly above his head.

He heard the woman's voice, low and mellow, and touched now with a faint bantering quality. "Why, Johnny Parks! What brings you out here into the middle of nowhere?"

The man's voice was casual, friendly. "Reckon it's the same thing keeps you here, Sara—business. We're looking for a man."

"Oh! Well, you can look in my cracker barrel, if you like. I didn't see him go in it, but you never can tell."

"Don't guess there's any need of that. I just thought you might have seen him."

"If I saw a customer, Johnny, I think I'd faint."

Johnny Parks laughed. "I'm surprised you don't see a lot of 'em—men customers, especially."

"Well, that's a pretty compliment! But seriously, Johnny, if there's a fugitive loose in the neighborhood, I'd rather you would look around."

After that Mark Fravel heard sounds of boxes and barrels being shoved around; then the footsteps were fainter, passing into the living quarters behind the store. Finally they were back again and the sheriff and Sara Rainville were at the door, he guessed, because the voices were fainter now—and he was unable to catch all the words. After another minute the voices faded entirely; then came a jingle of saddle gear and the hollow thump of hoofs. The posse was leaving.

For what seemed an interminable time, there was no sound at all overhead. Nervously, Mark Fravel rolled and lit a cigarette. *Maybe she's gone out to search my saddlebags,* he thought, and the irony of that thinned his mouth to a wry hardness suddenly. Then he heard footsteps again, and finally, the creaking sound of the counter being moved. A moment later the trap door came open, and the shadowy figure of Sara Rainville filled the aperture.

"All right. It's safe for you to come up now," she said.

He came up and a moment's strained silence ran between them as he helped her move the heavy counter back into position. It was a bulky, cumbersome object, and he marveled that she'd had the strength to handle it unaided.

He took off the mackinaw, and laid it deliberately on the counter. As he did, he placed his somber glance on her and said: "I don't know why you did it. I can't give you a thousand dollars. I can't even leave you my horse. And I'll never be back. There's only one trail I can take, and that's an out trail."

"There's always another trail," Sara Rainville murmured, and for a moment her gray eyes were veiled, thoughtful. "And you don't look like a murderer," she added simply. "If I'd thought you were, I'd have taken that thousand dollars without any hesitation."

"You put a lot of trust in a man's looks, don't you?"

"It's in your eyes," Sara Rainville said with quiet perception. "If you were a killer, you wouldn't run from a posse—you're not that kind."

He forced a laugh. "I try to pay my debts. What do you want?"

"Why, nothing." She said it with such genuine surprise that he almost believed her. "Unless—" She hesitated, then shook her head. "But you wouldn't have time. And it's a silly notion anyway."

He stared at her with quick suspicion. "Name it."

"It's nothing, really. She appeared reluctant to go on. "It's just that—well, I thought if you ever happened to be passing through a town where there was a dry goods store, you might get me another doll for Julie." She nodded to the corner. "I broke hers. The counter fell on it while I was trying to push it back in place."

He followed her glance to the corner. Julie, her pudgy little cheeks streaked with tears, was tucking the doll's broken body into an empty box and cooing to it distractedly.

Mark Fravel looked back at Sara Reinville. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I thought—" He checked himself, embarrassed suddenly. "I'll do what I can," he finished lamely.

Sara Rainville sighed. "It's so lonesome here for a child."

He silently cursed himself for an impulsive fool when she invited him to stay for supper, and he accepted. But the beef stew simmering fragrantly on the big wood stove in the other room was a temptation; this poised, soft-spoken woman with the pretty dark hair and the gray, sober eyes was a temptation, too. He knew that, now, and he fought against his feeling with every bitter thought he could summon to suppress it.

After the supper dishes had been cleared away and he had lighted the first decent-tasting cigarette he had smoked in days, he found himself blurting out the whole story to her. He told her about Sarina and about Tom Leto and about the quarter-section on which he had raised his flag marker after that grueling race into the Cherokee Strip. And after the telling he felt purged; he felt like a man who has just dropped a terrible, back-breaking burden.

"I think you should go back," she said quietly, when he had finished. "You say you had no gun on you. It was Tom Leto's gun. And Johnny Parks is honest. I'm sure you'd be exonerated. It would take courage, but I think you have that courage, Mark."

He said, "I couldn't go back. I couldn't ever face Sarina again. Not that I'd ever want to," he added with bitter vehemence.

She said, surprisingly, "I thought so—you're running from a woman, not murder," and he stared at her.

"I suppose so." He got up suddenly and walked to the stove. He lifted the lid and threw the butt of his cigarette into the fire. When he turned, he said, "I know so—now."

There was a sudden brightness in her eyes that hadn't been there before. Then she said: "My husband was Jack Rainville, Mark. Maybe you've heard of him. He—" She had trouble with her voice suddenly. "He's dead," she finished shortly.

Jack Rainville—now he remembered. A man named Rainville had traveled with the Doolins. He'd been shot.

He stared away somberly, unable to think of anything to say.

"After Jack left," Sara Rainville was saying, "a traveling commission merchant came through here. He suggested I open a little store. Said the homesteaders would need one,

before long. I bought a lot of things, and it took all the cash I had. But there hasn't been much business. I guess I'll sell—if I ever get the chance."

He stood up. His voice was harsh, abrupt, pushing past the sudden queer constriction in his throat. "Maybe you could use a partner here. Maybe if things work out, I'll be back."

Her gray eyes met his frankly. "I'm not in a hurry." Abruptly, she changed the subject. "I've grained your horse. It's outside, ready."

"Thanks. Don't bother coming to the door." He strode swiftly into the store without looking back. Julie was bent over the box she used for the doll's bed. The whole top of the doll's head had been cracked off, but she was still consoling it with aimless, childish chatter.

She looked up gravely at Mark Fravel. "My dolly's deaded," she said. "Mummy hurted it."

"I know." He bent over the box, and dropped the poke from his money belt into it. "You give this to your mummy after I'm gone. Maybe she'll be able to buy you a nice new one with it."

He hadn't heard Sara Rainville's soft step behind him, but now her voice ran out to him, sharply, protestingly. "Mark, no! I won't take it. You'll need—"

He kicked open the door and went out. Overhead, the stars glittered frostily. It would be a good night for riding.

FROM the top of Bald Hill, Mark Fravel looked down upon the raw slit in the prairie that marked the town of Wharton. At this distance, it sleazy false fronts looked like dark, ugly scabs on either side of an unhealed scar. Wharton—all the old, bitter memories washed back over him—memories of his race into the Strip, of Sarina, of Tom Leto; memories he had thought to blot from his heart and mind forever.

He could still turn back; he hadn't burned his bridges—yet. He held the reins of the chestnut in slack fingers, letting indecision build up its relentless, steady pressure against the dykes of his resolve. Suppose he took the gamble? If he lost, there could be only one outcome. On the other hand, what did he have to gain by running away? Sooner or later he'd run into a dead end.

Like a faint, dying echo, Sara Rainville's words came back to him. *There's always another trail. . . .*

There had been something in her eyes, something in her soft, cool voice, that had fallen on his warped, embittered soul like rain on parched earth—a memory of normalcy.

He gigged the chestnut.

He had only been in Wharton a few times, and there was little danger of recognition, unless he ran into one of Tom Leto's men. He pulled up at the first saloon, the Elite Bar, and hitched.

The bartender drew a foaming mug, and slid it across the dark cherrywood to him.

"Stranger?" he asked conversationally.

Mark Fravel sipped the cool beer. "No. I've been here before."

"Guess the place must look some different now, hey? This town has bust wide open since the land boom."

"It looks about the same to me," Mark Fravel said shortly. "By the way, who runs the Tom Leto place now?"

The bartender stared at him blankly. "The Tom Leto place? Why, Tom Leto—who do you think?"

Mark Fravel had the mug half raised to his lips. With a startling crash, it fell to the bar and burst into splinters.

Mark Fravel stared unseeingly at the foamy ruin. He lifted his glance to the bartender. "Sorry, but you did say Tom Leto?"

"Why, sure." The bartender was looking at him uneasily now. "Tom was in a little rookus with a sodbuster a while back; got a slug in the shoulder and lost some blood. But hell, he's okay now. He—hey, don't you want another beer?"

"Save it for me," Mark Fravel called back

(Continued on page 126)

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Fifteen Western Tales, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1946. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Fifteen Western Tales, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October, 1946. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40. Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

HEIR TO SIX-

A coward may die a thousand deaths—but it's only the last one that counts!

THE combination freight and passenger train slowed to a stop at the station marked Miles Junction, and Ray Hatten walked stiffly down the steps of the day coach and sucked in great draughts of fresh air when his high-heeled boots were planted solidly against the boards of the platform. He stretched his arms and worked the stiffness out of his knees, then walked toward the boxcars at the back of the train. He led his horse out of one and quickly saddled it, then built himself a smoke.

Hatten was hunkered down when the train pulled out, grudgingly admitting the iron horse had its place in the rapidly changing scheme of things. It had saved over one hundred and fifty miles of wear and tear on the sorrel that was stamping impatiently against the gravel, wanting to stretch its legs.

Hatten remained there, idly watching the small station plaza empty. He was a loosely built puncher, his skin toughened by heat and wind, making him seem much older than he really was. His eyes were half closed and speculating, and there was a small smile on his lips. Breathing in deeply, he drew a soiled letter from his pocket, flattened it out against his knee, and read it for the twentieth time.

> Dear Ray:
>
> I am mighty sorry to have to send you this news, but your pa took sick very sudden and passed away almost before we could git a doctor. Seems his heart give out. Before he went he asked me to send for you and tell you the Rocking Chair belongs to you. He held no grudge at the last, Ray.
>
> I might as well tell you the Rocking Chair ain't the best ranch in this part of the country, but a man with guts could build it up to that. Your pa never really cared much about what went on since that thing happened in Farrago, and since you went away. In case you're wondering, Saul Brecheen is foreman for The Hat. As far as I can see, that's the only part you'll have to iron out. A clear head and the right words ought to be enough, and you can bank on my support. Drop in and see me when you get here.
>
> Best regards,
> Frank Singleton, Atty.
> Farrago, Montana.

Hatten folded up the letter mechanically and shoved it into the pocket of his shirt, and the scrawled writing led his mind back over the years. Seven years, in fact. Time had not blurred the picture the least bit. . . .

Farrago pulsed with after-dusk activity and, in those times, the six-gun was still very much in the ascendancy when it came to settling differences between men. The wisdom of calm discussion, the power in men's fists had not been duly considered, hot tempers and grim tradition having been the order of those days. George Hatten and Burt Brecheen had been sworn enemies since Hatten had won the undivided favors of a pretty girl and had married her, and Brecheen, for years afterward, held to one increasing purpose, and that to smash Hatten and the small ranch he was building, even if he stepped outside the law to gain his end. The hate built up until a showdown was imminent and so, one night in Farrago, George Hatten faced Brecheen.

It was a night when there seemed to be no air stirring, and the smoke from the chimneys sent ramrod-straight smudgy bars up into the sultry sky. Brecheen came out of the hotel and saw Hatten standing across the street in front of the blacksmith shop, and said, "Hot as hell tonight, Hatten. A good time for you to go there!" and fired.

Friends of Brecheen said afterward that the empty barrel that rolled across the walk and struck the man against the legs just as he drew had been no accident. Be that as it may, Hatten had been quicker and Brecheen died quickly and fell face down into the dust.

Certain profound observations cannot be shrugged aside, particularly one that pertains to blood being thicker than water, and that night Saul Brecheen had seen his father die. He was only going on seventeen when the violence slammed hard against him and he still had much to learn about the swift handling of a Colt. The next day, he made it quite plain to Ray Hatten that he was willing to learn, and that young Hatten was the motive behind it.

"It wasn't a fair fight," young Brecheen snapped in front of a half dozen adults. "It was murder. One of your father's friends rolled that barrel. You know what's comin' to you!"

"I never wanted this way, Saul," Ray said. "I kept telling pa it was the sheriff's business. I—"

Ray Hatten shut his eyes and let the pic-

GUN HATE

He saw a shadowy figure hugging the wet darkness and yelled, "All right, Saul!" and fired. . . .

By LANCE KERMIT

tures fade and ground a cigarette butt against the boards. Kid talk, that was what it had been. Saul would be a man now, and he would act like a man. The Colt was passing in the West, and a gunman could not be found in every town. There was one thing Saul had never known. How young Ray Hatten had railed and ranted over the killing to his father, and said as soon as he was old enough to get a job somewhere, he would leave the Rocking Chair. He did not feel like working for an outfit that saw fit to prosper by another man's blood. He had been a kid, too, and had reasoned in proportion.

Hatten wore a six-gun, but it was an ornament. He seldom had it loaded. The fear of the Colt had not entirely left him, and he had nothing but contempt for a man who used one to win an argument. As Singleton had pointed out in his letter, there was only one thing to iron out. The lawyer meant Saul Brecheen, of course. Hatten felt a sudden pang of misgiving when he realized Singleton would not have mentioned Saul at all if the man didn't still hold a grievance.

Saul was a foreman, the lawyer had said. That meant that Burt Brecheen's small outfit had collapsed soon after his death, a circumstance not expected to thin his son's bitterness.

Ray Hatten knew he had returned to the valley for more than one reason. He had his pride. He was still aware of the whisperings he had heard the day he had ridden out of Farrago. The day he had reached his nineteenth birthday.

Saul Brecheen scared him out! There goes Hatten. Not much like his old man. Reckon

I'd do the same if I wanted to live a normal span. . . .

Hatten, as he peered into the heat haze toward the east, admitted certain truths. Saul Brecheen, a year after the shooting in Farrago, had become mighty proficient with a gun. He appeared in town with the Colt holster dropped low and thonged down, and he talked freely of a day that was to come. He said to Ray Hatten one night at a dance in Farrago, "You'd better get used to a Colt, mister. I won't give you much more time."

Hatten had none of his father's wild blood in him, but had inherited the mild slow temper of the woman who had inadvertently been responsible for the situation as it stood. There was no cowardice in him, only a resentment toward an instrument that made a weak man more powerful than a strong one. Saul Brecheen had been something of a weakling, physically, and Hatten knew no man would ever have to be afraid of his fists. But a six-gun was something else again. It had the destructive power and there was no need for much strength in the man behind it.

Ray Hatten thought, *I'm building things up in my mind. I'm judging Saul as a kid, and not a grown man. Time changes things and it's been nearly seven years. . . .* He got into saddle and rode toward the Yellowstone, thinking back to the job he had left near the Idaho line, not without some regret.

Fargo Bains, a cowpuncher, had said the day he rode away, "Like t' know myself how it feels to be an heir to somethin', Ray."

"Yeah?" he'd countered. "Even if it was a cemetery lot, Fargo? Be content the way you are."

SEVEN hours later Hatten came to a great tract of broken, mound-dotted prairie and rested his sorrel. He was cupping his hands around the flame of a match when he heard the distant crack of a rifle. It came again. No longer the voice of the Sharp's, but a repeating Winch. This was pronghorn season, he remembered.

Hatten remembered hunting with his father. Now he was back in his own country, he felt the joy of it and for the moment his mind was untroubled. He let the sorrel lope through the wooded bottoms, the song of a thrush pleasant in his ears. He heard the crack of a rifle again and judged it to come from out of the northeast. He rode out of the last ravines and cantered along the divide, the tops of the bluffs in the east beginning to redden in the sunrise.

He stopped at a spring that was merely a trickle of water at the the base of a butte, and had a cold breakfast. An hour later, leaning forward in the saddle he looked down into a coulee where a tent was pitched and smelled and heard a slab of venison sizzling in a pan. Three men were around the fire. Then he saw one of them straighten quickly and look toward the crest of a hill. He shifted his glance that way and saw the large pronghorn limned against the sky. Hatten was sure it was a buck.

The man snatched up a rifle and moved away from the fire. Hatten watched the pronghorn trot along the crest and occasionally it stopped and cropped a mouthful of grass, unmindful or disdainful of the danger threatening it. The puncher figured the hunter would intercept the buck near the bluff off to the right, and would throw a shot from not more than two hundred yards. He felt like yelling at the top of his lungs to give the animal fair warning, then thought better of it. A few moments later he saw the buck suddenly stop still and swing its head around, and he could almost hear the heavy-calibered slug hit it. The animal fell over and lay still.

Ray Hatten rode down to the campfire. One of the faces there was strongly familiar and he called out, "Mose, you old son-of-a-gun!"

A bow-legged man with a battered, old hat shaded his eyes from the glare of the early morning sun, and peered up. His stubbled face broke into a surprised grin and he called out, "Ray Hatten! Damned if it ain't!"

The other man said, "Light, kid, an' tear yourself off a chunk of meat. Huntin's been good." He looked quickly at Mose Tyler, and Mose said, "I'll take that ten dollars on payday, Charlie."

Hatten's eyes narrowed. "Somethin' t' do with me, Mose?"

Mose looked uncomfortable. "Reckon. Made a bet you'd come in answer to that letter." He eyed the gun Hatten wore and his face became a little sour.

"Not exactly professional, huh?" Ray said tightly, and got off his horse. Further comment slipped back into his throat when two other riders came in. A bulky man with a moon face approached the camp, carrying his Winch. He said, "Got that buck dead center," and seemed to be looking for appreciation.

Ray Hatten drew in his breath and held it when he looked at the man on the dun bronc. He knelt down by the fire to study a face he had kept in mind for many years, and found that it had matured differently than he'd imagined. Saul Brecheen's face showed very little weakness, even though it was sparsely fleshed. There was a hardness around Saul's mouth and his eyes were sharp and bright. Saul's attention was fixed on the moon-faced man.

"Quite a hunter, Chug," he said. "That buck stopped dead in front of you an' it didn't have a ghost of a chance. I don't like to get my meat that easy."

"Nobody asked you, Brecheen," the Rocking Chair rider snapped. "I don't hunt for the sport that's in it, but from necessity."

Saul grinned. "Every man to his own ideas, Chug," he said. "See you boys had good luck. Mind if we try ours for the Hat?" He got down from his horse and accepted a chunk of venison from Mose, and thanked him. "The hunted should have an equal chance," he said, and still seemed unaware of Ray Hatten's presence. "The bighorn is to my likin', friends. It's an animal that takes gettin'. It can run an' dodge an' climb places where most men are scared to climb. Yeah, you have to earn a bighorn if you want him. I've heard say it's a lie a chamois can hang by it's horns over a ledge, but one time I saw it."

"Too rugged for me, Saul," Mose grinned, and fidgeted nervously. As if he realized there was no postponing the inevitable, he said, "Ray—you remember Saul Brecheen?"

HATTEN stood up to his full height and cuffed the brim of his hat back over his dark mop of hair. Saul Brecheen's face changed suddenly as if a gray veil had been dropped over it. Seven years of brooding and bitterness filled his eyes and visibly shook him.

He looked at the hand Ray Hatten offered him, ignored it, and spat into the fire. "I didn't figure you'd come back, Hatten! Not even to get what your father left behind him. Understand this here an' now. This country ain't big enough to hold the both of us. I'm goin' to run you right out again!"

"I'd hoped you'd become a man," Ray Hatten said, his temper edged, a small spasm of disquiet in his midriff as he swiftly appraised the manner in which Saul wore his Colt. "I never held no ill-feelin' against you, Saul. What took place was none of my doing and it could have been my father just as well."

"It should've been. Only for that barrel. You can save your breath, Hatten. What I said goes till the end of time!"

"There's no sense to it, Saul," Mose Tyler said anxiously. "You got no cause t' hold a grudge against Ray, and a lot of men won't stand by an' let you gun him down!"

"Needs help, huh?" Saul grinned coldly. "Like his father. If he aims to stay on here he'd best remember to always have a crowd around him, because as soon as I find him alone, he'll have to use that gun he packs. He wears it like a tenderfoot! You can stay around these parts for a week, Hatten, t' say hello to your old friends. After that, I don't want you around!"

"I aim to stay on and take over what belongs to me, Saul," Hatten said.

Saul did not bother to answer. He nodded to the man with him, and got into the saddle and rode away.

There was a depressing silence around the campfire. Mose finally said dryly, "That's why Charlie here was so anxious to make that bet with me. Singleton give you a hint at all?"

"A mild one, Mose," Ray said. He watched Saul Brecheen until the man had ridden out of sight. "How are things with the Rocking Chair?"

"Not bad, not good," Mose said, and bit a chunk of tobacco from a half-eaten plug. "We don't seem to have as many head of beef as the calf-count warrants."

"Got any ideas?"

Mose glanced toward Chug, said, "Your guess is as good as ours, Ray. I figure you realize how bad Brecheen wants to git that outfit of his back and where he'd hit first to do it."

"Quite a legacy I fell into, Mose," Hatten said, and at the moment was sorry he had ever left the peaceful range close to Idaho. "Well, for a week I can walk in the open. Let's get on home."

The Rocking Chair home ranch lay on both sides of a small tributary of the Yellowstone. Hatten and his punchers followed the sweeps of the watercourse, cut out of a great oval wooded bottom and came out to the glade where the ranch buildings were spread out. Ray Hatten stopped the sorrel and let the memories swirl around him. He heard voices that were no longer there, the bark of a dog he'd lost ten years ago.

The ranch house, built of logs, was in good condition, but the outbuildings needed repair and coats of whitewash. Three horses were in the corral and there was a clattering of pots and pans in the cookhouse, the smell of roasting pork.

Mose said, "There's three other riders, Ray. They ought to be in any minute."

"I'll see them in due time," Ray said, and rode to the main house.

He stood in the big living room and looked at the old scarred desk in the corner. His father's pipes were placed in a hand-made rack on the wall, next to a big wooden peg from which a gunbelt hung. The handle of the Colt was of polished walnut, and Ray Hatten had cause to remember it. The door of a room swung open. It was the room where his mother had died trying to bear George Hatten another son. He went into the room that had been his and shut the door behind him.

An hour later, Hatten went down to the bunkhouse and ate with the punchers. Mose Tyler made him acquainted with three other Rocking Chair hands, Wally Neal, Blink Varney, and Solo Smith. They said they were glad to see him and that he could depend on them, and while they said it he saw that look

in their eyes, and he knew they were also thinking of Saul Brecheen. Afterward, he took Mose up to the house with him and checked over the papers in his father's desk. By midnight he had everything in his mind there was to know about the Rocking Chair, and he said to Mose, "The first thing we have to do is go into town and buy the things we need. Barbed wire and tarpaper. Nails—Mose, I've got to go to bed. I'm plumb tuckered out."

RAY HATTEN arrived in Farrago toward the middle of the afternoon and he had not been there an hour when he realized that the word had rapidly spread. Scraps of conversation, the subtle actions of men told him plainly enough. He went up to Frank Singleton's office and found the lawyer talking with Griff Osterman, the sheriff. Singleton grinned broadly as he got up, but Osterman's face did not change.

"Seems most people didn't expect me back," Ray said, and sat on the edge of Singleton's big desk. "That business I got to iron out. Looks like it'll take only one certain kind of iron. I've already seen an' talked to Saul Brecheen. He hasn't changed since that night. He's got worse if anythin'."

Osterman said, "You settle your differences outside this town, Hatten! There'll be no violence here." He stared at the Colt Hatten wore, and a muscle in his long lean face twitched. The handle was of polished walnut.

"The one I carried wasn't ever used, sheriff," Ray said with a one-sided grin. "This one has been kept well oiled and it fits in a Hatten's hand. I'll come back later, Frank. I want to look the town over."

He moved along the walk, recalling certain faces and recognizing voices. People stopped him and talked with him a few moments and most of them had a question in their eyes. They seemed a little afraid and their conversation was guarded. He stopped in front of a window on which black letters said *Farrago Chronicle* and peered through the big panes and saw a girl sitting at a desk. She looked up and met his glance and he knew he had never seen her before. And not until this moment had he seen a woman possessing the power to disturb him. He knew now that a man did not need to see a woman day after day, night after night, in order to fall in love with her.

Hatten went inside the office and he thought a pinkish color appeared suddenly in the girl's tanned face. He raised his hat and said, "I thought I'd drop in—kind of—an' ask how much it costs a line to advertise in the *Chronicle,* ma'am."

If the girl saw through the subterfuge she gave no sign of it. She smiled pleasantly. "You're looking for a job, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "My name's Ray Hatten. I got the Rockin' Chair left t' me. Maybe you knew my father."

She nodded. "I've heard about you." Her smiled faded quickly and she got up from her chair. "I'm pleased to hear you came back, Mr. Hatten. I am Laura Wakefield."

He took the hand she held out to him and held it longer than he knew was right. "Sorry," he said, as she drew it away.

"About those advertising rates," she said quickly. "Let me see if I—"

He managed to carry through his deception and then hurried out of there and now he knew he had to stay in the valley and that Saul Brecheen, backed up by a dozen toughs, would never run him out. He retraced his steps and came to the hardware store where Mose Tyler and Solo Smith were loading rolls of wire into the Rocking Chair buckboard.

He gave them a hand, and when the wagon was loaded, built himself a smoke, and said to Mose, "That girl at the *Chronicle,* Laura Wakefield. Who is she?"

Mose glanced at him, his bushy brows lifting. "Her pa took the paper over couple of months ago, Ray. She's mighty wholesome." Mose stared at the ground for a moment. "Look, it's none of my business, kid. But with the way things are—well, women have cottoned to certain men in a few days before, and if she's heard the talk goin' around—"

Hatten said, "I see what you mean, Mose. A walking corpse. Well, let's get rollin'."

Yes, he saw what Mose meant right enough, and on his way back to the Rocking Chair, resentment toward Saul Brecheen gradually built up until he knew he had a definite hate for the man. Saul was the hunter and Ray Hatten was the hunted. He knew he had no more chance against Saul than had the prong-horn against the Rocking Chair puncher's Winch that morning he had ridden into the valley.

Suddenly he had a thought and when he rode alongside the buckboard, he was grinning. Mose looked at him.

"A nice night, Mose," he said.

"Is it? I just can't seem to feel like laughin', kid."

Solo Smith asked, "How are you with a Colt, boss?"

"I know which end the bullets come out," Hatten said. "That's about all I know."

"Thought as much," Mose said in a small tight voice.

"How does Saul fit with the sheriff?"

"Like a fence-post fits into a keyhole," Solo offered. "But Osterman ain't exactly got the courage of a lion an' he has a wife an' three kids."

"I see," Hatten said. "I guess Saul is the last man in this part of the country with gun

fever, an' he most likely'll draw what's left in other parts here if he gets a reputation as a killer. Wouldn't be good for the valley."

"Talk don't cost a thing," Solo Smith observed. "Guess that's why I shoot my mouth off when I got no right to, boss. I take it back."

"Don't blame you none, Solo," Hatten said. "Let's just say nobody is goin' to run me out of my own part of the world."

Mose grinned. "I always said you had a lot of your pa in you."

It came to the end of the sixth day. Blink Varney rode into the Rocking Chair at dusk and called to Ray, who was sitting on the porch, mending a piece of harness. Ray walked out into the yard and Blink leaned out of the saddle and said, "Saw Saul in Farrago. He give me a message."

"Think I know what it was," Hatten said.

"He said to be sure to leave at sundown tomorrer, boss."

Hatten nodded. "After you line your stomach, Blink, I want you to ride to the Hat. Tell Saul I'll be in Farrago at eight o'clock tomorrow night."

Blink nodded, and grinned widely. "I win a bet, boss," he said, then quickly straightened his face. "Look, you can't stand up to Saul. He's fast—I've seen him shoot."

Ray didn't answer him.

THE sky was overcast when Ray Hatten rode into Farrago—at sundown. A few of the street lamps were already burning. Crossing the street from the livery stable after he'd turned his horse in, men spoke to him briefly, their manner grimly significant. He went into Griff Osterman's cramped office and shut the door behind him. The lawman was jumpy, riled.

"Get out of town, Hatten. For a while anyway."

"Listen fast, Griff," Ray Hatten said. "I sent word to the Hat that I'd be in Farrago at eight o'clock. I will be. I haven't time to waste talk with you. I'll be up the far end of the town somewhere and you don't have to know where. I'm the hunted, Griff. I claim as much right for an even break as a pronghorn or a mountain sheep. Saul gave me the idea himself a few days ago. Watch for him to come into town, Griff, and tell him this. Tell him in his own words. You have to show a lot of skill and guts to get an animal running loose in its own country. That's me, Griff. I'm not going to stand up like a dumb pronghorn and let Saul Brecheen blast me to Kingdom Come. He'll understand. Tell him at eight o'clock, I'm moving down this way. He will move from the opposite direction. It'll be dark, Griff. We'll have as much chance as the other. He'll know what I mean!"

Osterman said, "Ray, it looks like I have to go along with it. Better start now. No tellin' how fast Saul is comin'." He grinned for the first time since Hatten had come back, "Smart headwork, kid!"

Hatten went out the back way, skirted the corner of the small square building and broomed the street before he set forth. He moved along the walk to the western tip of the town and then went in through a small areaway, ducked into an abandoned shed and sat down to wait. He knew the town, its small alleys and warrens. He fixed a layout of Farrago in his mind as he sat in the dark. It would be dark at eight o'clock. Osterman would quickly pass the warning around and the street would be clear. Certain men would make sure that Saul did not start the hunt before eight o'clock.

He weighed his chances and found them not too slim. True, Brecheen possessed the gun savvy, but he was going to learn that a man was not going to stand up in the street and let him shoot him down. He had a hunt on his hands, the kind of hunt he claimed to relish. The quarry was where he had to flush it out and he would leave himself open to a bullet with every step he took through Farrago.

The waiting was rugged. It wrung the sweat out of Ray Hatten. He drew his father's gun and got the feel of the walnut handle in his grip. He thought of other days, and those that were still to come centered around Laura Wakefield. He kept waiting and thinking until a clock struck eight times, and then he moved out of the shed, walked swiftly toward the other end of town. He went through a narrow aperture in the board fence of Horley's lumber yard, made his way through the stacks of boards until he found one high enough and near enough to the street to suit his purpose. He climbed it and flattened out on top of it and he commanded a view of Farrago's main street.

The town was hushed. He could see faces at lamp-lit windows. It began to drizzle and the darkness seemed to deepen. Then he saw a shadowy figure hugging the side of the building housing Singleton's office and when it shouldered around the corner into an areaway, he yelled, "All right, Saul!" and fired a shot.

It splintered the clapboards above Brecheen's head and the latter cursed loudly and threw the first bullet from his Colt. Hatten heard it as he dropped quickly off the pile of lumber. He was crouched near a big wagon close to the high board fence when Saul's voice boomed out of the dark not more than fifty feet away.

"A hell of a way for a man to fight, Hatten! But you'll never get out of this town alive!" Saul's voice was unsteady.

Gunfire bloomed near a pile of boards, after

Hatten threw a chunk of wood off to his left. Just as he figured, Saul had quickly changed his position. He fired a shot and thought he heard a painful grunt. A slug chugged into the hard-packed dirt behind him as he swerved into an areaway leading to the wide main street. He jumped into a doorway and flattened, his gun held ready.

He heard a thump of boots stop quickly. He was certain he heard Saul's panting breath. A tin can clattered as a toe hit it, and Ray Hatten swung around slowly, leaned out and threw two shots, low, at the mouth of the warren. Saul Brecheen swore with rage and Hatten heard him dive for cover.

"All right, Hatten! All right. I'm coming at you!"

HE DID not want to kill Saul, nor any man. He flattened against the door, his mouth terribly dry. The door gave way at his pressure and he almost tumbled inside. He kept his feet and groped his way and fell against a flight of stairs. He ran up them quickly and came to a landing that caught some of the light from a window across the street. There was a ladder at the side leading to the roof, and Hatten went through the trap just ahead of two shots from Saul's six-gun.

"The night is still young," Saul said in a strained voice.

"Like huntin' them bighorns?" Ray Hatten countered, his words laboring from lack of breath. He backed away across the roof, keeping the open trap covered. He shot a glance over the edge of the roof and saw that there was a porch in back and the roof of that had a deep slant. He risked a broken leg and dropped. He hit and started sliding and then he was picking himself off the ground, badly shaken.

Ten minutes later, Ray Hatten caught Saul Brecheen in the open between the Farrago Hotel and the Chinese laundry. The man was just ducking into the mealy blackness of the narrow way when he fired. Saul was rocked off balance, and his painful grunt carried halfway up the long street. He stumbled into the areaway like a desperately cornered wild beast and then the darkness there bloomed gunfire. Ray Hatten yelled, "Good hunting, Saul?" and swung quickly away from the protection of the great locust tree in front of the livery stable. He was among the shacks on the western edge of Farrago a few minutes later, moving cautiously.

Saul Brecheen suddenly screamed out, "Blast you, Hatten!" and Ray's tongue glued itself to the roof of his mouth as he waited for the bullet. He swung around on his heels, hardly aware of doing so, and he saw Saul standing on the very edge of the roof at the rear of the Farrago hotel. Saul had his arm hooked around a narrow smokestack and one of his legs seemed buckling under him.

Saul fired even as he saw him, but the top of the smokestack broke off and he screamed as he pitched off the roof. The bullet raked Ray Hatten's leg and thudded into the ground and it was not the burn of it that made him a little sick. He ran toward the alley in back of the Farrago house, and threw his gun away.

He was looking down at the hunter when four men came out of the hotel kitchen. Saul Brecheen was very still on the ground. Blood trickled from a wound in his leg and his right shirt-sleeve was soaked with it. Hatten knew these hurts had not resulted from the fall from the roof. He helped carry Saul to the doctor's office. Osterman said as they bore Saul along, "It was the damndest thing I've ever seen. Figure it's settled everythin' for keeps, kid."

Three hours later, the doctor said Saul Brecheen would make it all right. The fall had broken his right arm in two places and he had a slight concussion. "The bullet holes was the worst that happened to the man," the doctor said. "Must have lost a lot of blood before he climbed up on that roof." He stuffed his pipe with scrap and set it going. "I'll fix the arm up the best I know how. I figure it'll stay a mite crooked, though."

Osterman said, "I hope you're sure of that."

Mose Tyler came into the hotel room where Saul lay. He looked at Hatten and grinned. "Looks like you proved to be a mighty tough bighorn, kid. Wonder if Saul will ever go huntin' for them critters ag'in?"

Ray Hatten did not say anything. He had ironed out that one grim difficulty and now there was nothing to worry about save build up the Rocking Chair—and maybe find a mistress for it. In a few days he'd pay a visit to the *Chronicle*. While the doctor dressed his own bullet burns, he hardly felt the sting at all.

He went in to see Saul late the next day. The foreman of the Hat, his arm splinted, stared at the plastered wall and ignored his visitor's greeting. Hatten took a long deep breath. "Why be stubborn, Saul? I repeat what I said. I hold no ill-feelin'."

Saul's head finally rolled on the pillow. The face turned toward Hatten wore a small grin. "Best hunt I ever had, Ray. Been feelin' funny all day, like a lot of meanness was runnin' out of me." He turned his face to the wall again and did not speak for fully five minutes. When he heard Hatten move toward the door, he said, "There's a hundred head of beef that rightfully belongs t' you out—"

"I'll get 'em in due time, Saul," Ray said. "Hurry an' get up on your feet."

A few minutes later, Ray Hatten walked into the office of the Farrago *Chronicle* and, just as he'd expected Laura Wakefield smiled up at him.

LEAD SHY

Steve had ridden the gun-trails long enough to know that the best thing about a dead shot—is the dead part!

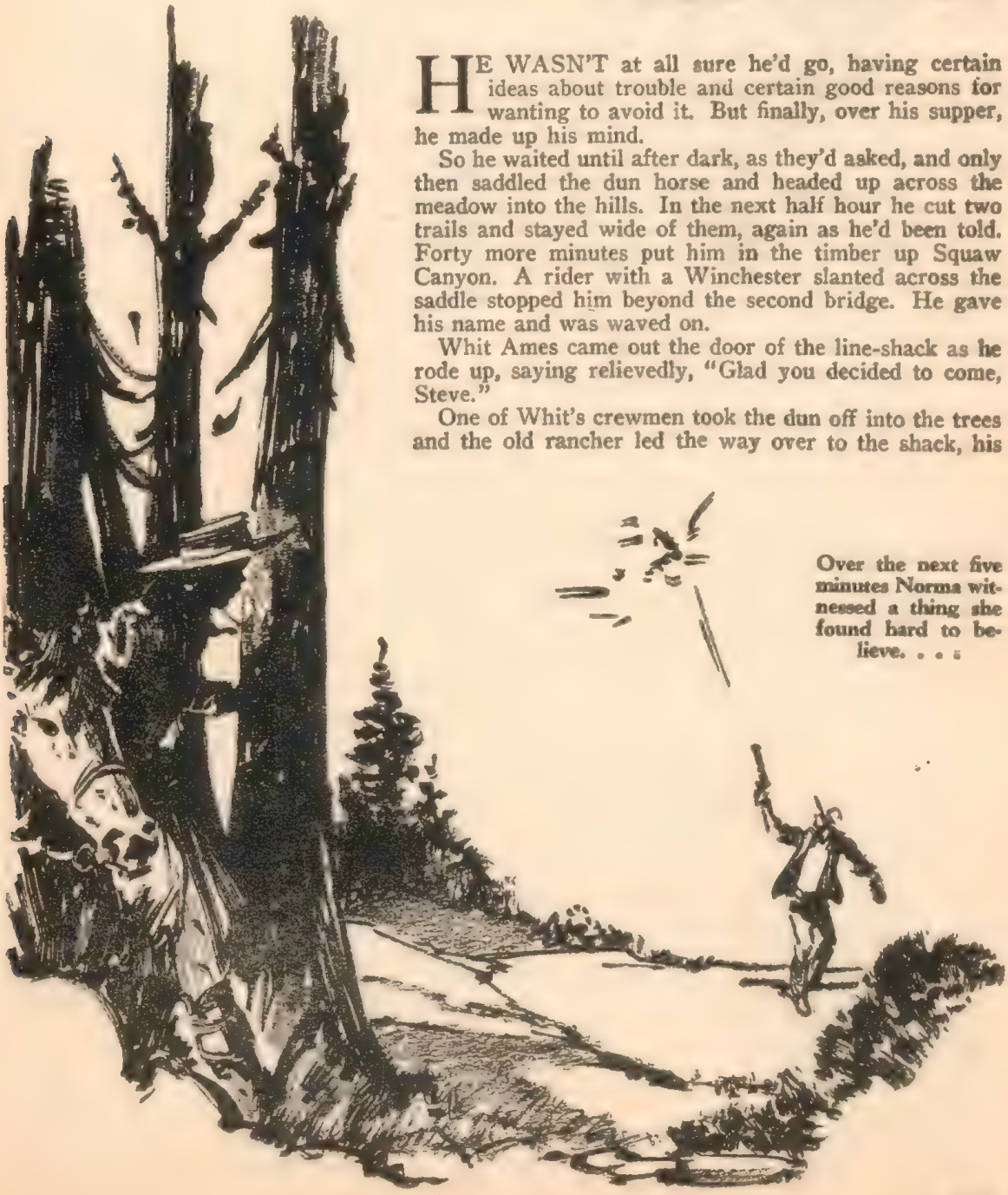
By PETER DAWSON

HE WASN'T at all sure he'd go, having certain ideas about trouble and certain good reasons for wanting to avoid it. But finally, over his supper, he made up his mind.

So he waited until after dark, as they'd asked, and only then saddled the dun horse and headed up across the meadow into the hills. In the next half hour he cut two trails and stayed wide of them, again as he'd been told. Forty more minutes put him in the timber up Squaw Canyon. A rider with a Winchester slanted across the saddle stopped him beyond the second bridge. He gave his name and was waved on.

Whit Ames came out the door of the line-shack as he rode up, saying relievedly, "Glad you decided to come, Steve."

One of Whit's crewmen took the dun off into the trees and the old rancher led the way over to the shack, his



Over the next five minutes Norma witnessed a thing she found hard to believe. . . .

banty-rooster frame dwarfed by Steve's medium-tall and stocky one. They went in and Whit closed the door before striking a match.

They were all here, Steve saw, six men with faces hard-set in the sudden flare of light. Someone had thought to hang a blanket across the sashless window and the cool breeze slanting down off the peaks stirred the blanket a little as Whit lit a candle and stuck it to the top of the rusty stove.

Then Whit announced, "Steve makes it a solid lineup against Sanders. John, let's get down to business."

John Rice singled Steve out with his steady glance. "We weren't sure about you, Cross," he said. "Some of us aren't even yet. No one's ever seen you pack a gun."

He left it like that and the faint politeness that edged his words took the sting out of them. Steve realized that they must have arranged it beforehand that the Bench's biggest owner should have this ticklish job of sounding him out. Naturally, they weren't taking any chances.

He wondered how he could tell them. Finally he decided he couldn't and said, "No. But I'm with you all the way against Sanders."

"Are you Quaker, Steve?" Whit Ames asked quietly.

Steve's lean face broke into its ready smile. "No."

John Rice looked at Whit with a question in his eyes and then Amos Wyles spoke up, gruffly saying, "Hell, John, he'll count for as much as me. I couldn't put a hole through a barn if I was inside it."

Joe White grunted his agreement and the other two nodded and John Rice caught that before his glance swung back to Steve. "Guess that settles it," he said, the sternness going out of his face as he added, "So let's get on with this, Whit."

A general relief eased the tension now. Joe White took out a sack of tobacco dust and began rolling up a smoke as Whit hitched up his trousers and began, "The idea is that we go to the meetin' tomorrow with some proposition that'll keep Mart Sanders from making this steal. We can forget the sheriff. Even if we could count on him, Sanders has the law on his side. It's legal for him to throw his crew onto that grass to homestead it."

"But it's always been free range" Amos Wyles protested. "We've all shared it for thirty winters. Now this gent gets too big for his britches. If he goes through with it, we wind up a bunch of ten-cow outfits. Then there's Norma Fitzhugh—" He stopped there, not knowing how to go on.

"We all hate it on that account," John Rice said. "Love's a funny thing. As far as that goes, we all thought pretty good of Mart until this came up. I don't hold it against Norma."

"Who does?" Amos bridled.

"Another thing," Whit inserted. "One of us'll have to do the talking for the whole crowd at the meetin' tomorrow."

They all saw the way he looked at Steve now and Joe White was quick to say, "If Steve don't pack a gun, why not him? That'll show Sanders we're not trying to stir up trouble."

Steve shook his head and was about to say something when John Rice put in his word. "That's a sound idea."

"Hold on, Steve," Joe said, anticipating Steve's protest. "Think it over. We're all more or less old-timers here. You're not. So you won't be up there workin' off any grudges. Like the one my father bore old man Sanders, never again speakin' to him. Or like John here, buckin' the sheriff last election. You've got a lot of friends, Steve, and you're the only one of us—"

He broke off, cocking his head toward the door, listening. Then the rest of them heard it, heard the slow hoof-falls of a horse sounding from below along the clearing.

Whit Ames growled, "They were told not to bother us." He leaned over and blew out the candle and went slowly to the door, opening it.

Steve had barely made out Whit's shape against the starlight beyond when he saw Whit suddenly stiffen and push his coat aside and lift out a Colt's.

Then Whit was calling, "Who is it?"

"Just me, Whit," came an answer.

Steve gave a start, recognizing that voice. Alongside him, John Rice breathed sharply, "Now who told her we'd be up here?"

STEVE heard the horse walking up to the shack and shortly there came the squeal of a stirrup-leather and then Whit was asking, "How did you know, Norma?"

"Mart told me," Norma Fitzhugh's voice answered. Just then she stepped up to the door so that they could see her and she asked, "Why didn't you let me know about this? Or don't I count on the Bench any longer?"

"Come in, Norma," John Rice said in a tired voice.

She followed Whit in through the door and someone lit the candle again. And there she stood, a tall slim girl with cornsilk hair, wearing a man's outfit of waist-overalls and dark red flannel shirt. There was that alert bright look to her eyes as her glance briefly touched each of them, Steve the last.

She smiled at him, saying, "Hello, Steve. I was afraid you wouldn't come. I can see Mart's face when he finds out you're with us. The one good thing he's ever said about this was that he's sorry to be pushing you around."

"What's behind all this, Norma?" John

Rice asked angrily. "Why should Mart hate us so?"

"Why? For a lot of reasons." She was serious now. "You, John, because you fought him last election. And maybe because you own the biggest brand on the slope. He hates Joe because Lem White would never speak to his father. He can't stand Whit because he thinks Whit stole those eight lower sections from his family. He could even hate me because dad always thought his old man got his start by rustling. He wants to get even."

"Yet you're marryin' him," Whit said in his gentle way.

She looked at him and Steve noticed the way her head tilted up proudly, the candlelight etching her flawless profile to show strength beneath the prettiness. "Yes, Whit, maybe I am marrying him," she said. "But not until he's learned his lesson. If he learns it, well and good. If he doesn't—" She raised her shoulders, leaving it like that, adding, "Which is my reason for being here. I want to stop him as much as you do. Maybe more."

It struck Steve that none of them, not even John Rice, for a moment questioned her right to be here after that straightforward statement. Joe White took up where he had left off before her coming had interrupted things. It was decided over Steve's protest that he would be spokesman for the group at tomorrow's meeting of the cattle association. For a time they discussed ways and means of discouraging Mart Sanders from his plan of homesteading the vast range that gave all the Bench outfits rich winter graze. No one could suggest a way beyond an open fight. And no one except Norma dared suggest that.

"Why not?" she asked, after they had argued that it wasn't the place of the Bench outfits to bring this to a shootout. "Dad would turn in his grave if he heard this kind of talk. I have five men on the place, including the cook. You can have all five and I'll work in the kitchen myself if you'll get together and lay down the law to Mart. A year from now he'll have all that water fenced off and we'll be shoved back into the hills. He must be shown he can't get away with a thing like this."

"But he's got the law on his side, Norma," Whit said. "And the sheriff's his man. The minute we fire a shot, there'll be warrants out for us."

The argument went on. The candle burned down and another took its place. In the end, when John Rice looked at his watch and remarked that in another quarter hour it would be midnight, nothing much had been decided. Tomorrow they would all attend the meeting and Steve would state their case. If Mart Sanders didn't back down, John Rice would take the stage to Sweetwater and see the federal commissioner, although that was a forlorn hope.

When they all rode back down the canyon there wasn't much talking. Whit and Joe White turned off where the upper trail forked and when Steve left them Norma came with him, telling the rest, "Might as well take the short cut," as she said her good nights.

She and Steve were riding through the pines half a mile below when he said, "They forgot to ask you how Mart knew we were up there."

"He wouldn't say," she told him. "But I suppose he's bought off one of John Rice's crew."

She waited for him to comment on that and presently, when he didn't, she said almost savagely, "None of you know how set Mart is in this. And I won't have it, Steve! If he finds out he can treat people this way, it's the way he'll treat me. I'd leave him if he ever tried it."

"He'll be hard to stop," Steve drawled.

They went on for a time in silence, Steve leading the way through the draw above the meadow where the scrub-oak was a hard tangle to ride through.

Below, she brought her horse even with him again, saying, "I'm glad they picked you to speak for us, Steve. You have no other quarrel with Mart. And you don't even carry a gun."

He laughed softly, "So they reminded me."

"Why is it, Steve?"

"Why is what?"

"That you never carry one."

His impulse was to tell her the whole thing, for his feelings toward this girl were strong, dating back to his first week in this country nearly five years ago. But then the stubbornness and the pride that were in him crowded back the urge and made him say simply, "It keeps me out of trouble, Norm."

"Just that? Nothing more."

"Nothing you'd understand."

All the way down to his cabin along the meadow neither of them spoke. He knew that his answer had offended her and it made him angry, partly with himself for having spoken so bluntly, partly with her for never having given him reason for sharing this confidence he had never shared with anyone. *She must know how I feel*, he told himself. But then he knew she didn't. She belonged to Mart Sanders and, as usual, that realization laid a deep depression through him.

He got to thinking about a way he might easily settle all this trouble, discarding the idea at once. Then he thought of something else that lifted a strong excitement in him and from then on as far as his gate he wasn't thinking of much else.

She said, matter-of-factly, "Good night,

Steve," not even stopping at the gate but drifting her horse over toward the trail.

He had to call out to make her hear, asking, "What time'll you be going in tomorrow, Norm?"

She reined in, turned in the saddle to look back at him. "Around nine. Why?"

"Want to pick me up on your way past?"

"Yes. I'd like to, Steve." There was some life in her voice now.

"Don't forget," he said.

"I won't. Good night, Steve."

Later, after heating up some coffee, he pulled the brass-bound trunk from under his bed and dug out the horn-handled .44.

He spent a good hour wiping off the grease and oiling the weapon. The leather loops of the belt had corroded the shells a dark green. *They'll do, even if a few won't go off,* he decided.

IT WAS ten minutes short of nine when Norma topped the rise in the trail and started down along the half-mile slope toward Steve's cabin. She was less than halfway down the slope when she saw him ride out from behind the barn and head up across the meadow. She tried to think of what might be taking him away from the cabin when he had asked her to stop by for him. Then she called, afterward realizing that the distance was too great for him to hear.

By the time she rounded the corral, he was out of sight in the timber far above. Now she was feeling a keen disappointment. She wondered if she should go on to town, rejected the idea, half decided to wait for him on the porch. Then her curiosity got the best of her and she started up across the meadow.

She was riding into the trees when she heard a shot. She reined in quickly, suddenly afraid and strangely so. Another shot echoed down to her, then a third. And now she touched the roan with the spur, weaving up between the pines at a run.

She came within sight of the draw and saw Steve standing up near the head of it and the fear left her and she pulled the roan down to a walk. Abruptly, she saw Steve's arm lift and he tossed something into the air. Then his other hand streaked up and a shot blasted the stillness.

Curious rather than afraid now, she reined in and climbed aground. She was perhaps three hundred yards from Steve as he repeated what he'd done a moment ago, tossed something into the air and took a quick unaimed shot at it. This time she saw the object go kiting away as the bullet hit.

Over the next five minutes Norma Fitzhugh witnessed a thing she had a hard time believing. She watched Steve reload the gun, then thrust it through the belt of his waist-overalls. Then, deliberately, he would toss whatever it was—pine-cones, she guessed—into the air, draw and fire. He made four hits out of five.

Fascinated now, she watched him reload again, again thrust the gun through his belt. Now he took something bigger in his hand. When he tossed it, she saw that it was several of the same objects he had been throwing. When they were high in the air his hand blurred toward his belt so fast that her eye could scarcely follow the move. The gun flashed out and exploded in staccato bursts that sent a long roll of thunder down the draw. She saw at least three of those small arching dots jump from hits.

She didn't wait for more but led the roan back through the trees. When she came to the meadow, she skirted it rather than cross it openly; and she was in a hurry all the way to the cabin, thinking he might be returning any minute now.

Twenty minutes later, when Steve rode around the corner of the cabin, she was sitting on the porch, still awed by what she had seen.

He gave her a smile and touched the brim of his wide hat. "You're early, Norm. Been waiting long?" he asked innocently.

"Since nine."

He tried to look surprised. "Since nine?" Then he frowned, saying, "I've got to fix that danged clock." He came down out of the saddle in a hurry and climbed the porch steps, going to the door and telling her, "Be with you in two minutes."

Inside, changing into the black suit that had always fit his heavy wide shoulders too snugly, he was thinking, *She took it in about the clock. Wonder what she thinks about what she saw?* Ten minutes ago, up in the timber, he had come across the tracks of her roan, knowing then that his plan so far was working the way he had hoped it would.

When he came out onto the porch again; he had the clock in his hand and showed it to her, asking, "How far off is it?"

"About half an hour slow," she said.

They talked of a lot of things on the way to town and he purposely avoided any mention of last night. It wasn't until Ledge lay below them and they were taking the trail down off the rim that she abruptly said, "Steve, you wouldn't tell me last night. But why is it you never carry a gun?"

He gave her a thoughtful glance, saying finally, "All right, Norm. Maybe you have the right to know."

He paused briefly before continuing. "Once I killed a man. He needed killing and the law agreed. Then one of his friends took it up where he left off. I only crippled him, on purpose. There were witnesses that backed me up on self-defense.

"After that, I got to thinkin'. This man had other friends. It looked like I'd have my hands full trying to persuade them. Sooner or later there'd be real trouble. So I left that country and came here. And decided never to go against a man with a loaded gun again."

Norma nodded and, after a few moments, asked, "Why did you say that I had a right to know, Steve?"

"Because you're to think the right things about me," came his humble answer.

"Others may be thinking the wrong things, Steve."

"The others don't matter."

Her glance came sharply around to him and, when she saw that he meant it exactly as it sounded, her face took on color and in her confusion she lifted rein, sending the roan on ahead.

Presently she said softly, "Thank you for that, Steve," and there was a tenderness in her eyes that lifted a small excitement in him until he told himself it couldn't mean what he hoped it did.

Shortly, riding the street, they saw John Rice and Whit Ames and Joe White standing under the Emporium's awning and Norma said, "See you later," knowing Steve would want to be with them.

SHE went on down along the rank of false-fronted buildings and found Mart Sanders and Ed Grimes, Mart's foreman, sitting on the hotel veranda. She tied at the hitch-rail there and, as she came up the steps, both of them got up, Mart touching his hat.

He was a big man, a full head taller than Steve, she judged. Just now she was feeling strangely annoyed by his bigness and by what she read as a touch of arrogance in his smile.

"Mart, I'd like to see you alone," she said.

"Not now." His smile broadened. "Later, Norma."

"Why not now?" she asked, unable to keep anger from her tone.

"You went up Squaw with that bunch last night. If they're sickin' a woman on me in hopes it'll change my mind, I want Ed here to keep me from going soft."

She felt her face go hot as she said, "This is something personal, Mart."

"Then it can wait." He was still smiling.

Anger darkened the hazel of her eyes as she said, "Then Ed can hear this. Steve Cross was elected to speak for the Bench at the meeting this morning. He'll try to talk some sense into you, Mart. My advice is that you let him."

"So Steve's gone in with 'em?" he said idly. He shrugged. "Okay, that's his hard luck. I was hoping nothing would happen to him."

"Steve can look out for himself, Mart."

He looked at Ed Grimes and winked. He looked down at Ed's lowslung gun, drawling, "Not the way I mean, he can't."

Anger crowded her beyond discretion now and, uncaring, she told him, "He can take care of himself that way, too."

"Y' don't say!" Mart Sanders laughed softly, mockingly.

"He never carries a gun because he's afraid to," she flared. "Because he's so good with one that he could shoot the buttons off your shirt before you could get a gun clear."

"So that's their line, is it?" Mart breathed, his smile fading.

Then, before she knew what was happening, he stepped around her, saying, "Come along, Ed."

On his way down the steps he nodded to two more of his men loafing on the walk. They went to their horses and only as Mart was swinging into the saddle did Norma have a premonition that made her call, "Wait, Mart!"

He looked across at her and slowly shook his head, saying, "This had to come sooner or later. It might as well be now."

She called to him once more. He didn't even turn his head and in another moment Ed Grimes rode in alongside him, the other pair following, and they went up the street.

They rode as far as the Emporium and were coming in on the tie-rail there before Norma left the porch and started toward them.

NOW what? Looks like he's sore about something," Whit Ames muttered to the others as Mart Sanders swung in toward them.

Mart eased his big frame aground and ducked under the raid and stepped up onto the walk in front of them. His three men stayed in the saddle, lined up along the rack. "Now," Mart drawled at Steve, "I hear you're hell on wheels with a gun, Cross. Suppose you give us a sample."

He waited a moment. Steve didn't move. Then, deliberately, Mart reached in under his coat and pulled his .38 Colt's from shoulder-holster, holding it out to Steve. "Here, take it," he said. "Let it hang down at your side and try and lift it before Ed draws on you."

"No thanks," Steve said.

"Go on, take it," Mart insisted.

Steve only shook his head.

Mart sighed his disgust and then, putting the weapon back in the holster, he looked at John Rice. "Some ramrod you picked," he drawled.

"You keep your tongue off us, Sanders!" Whit Ames bridled. "Otherwise, you'll—"

Mart's glance swiveled quickly to him, and he asked, "You'll what?"

(Continued on page 128)

DEAD

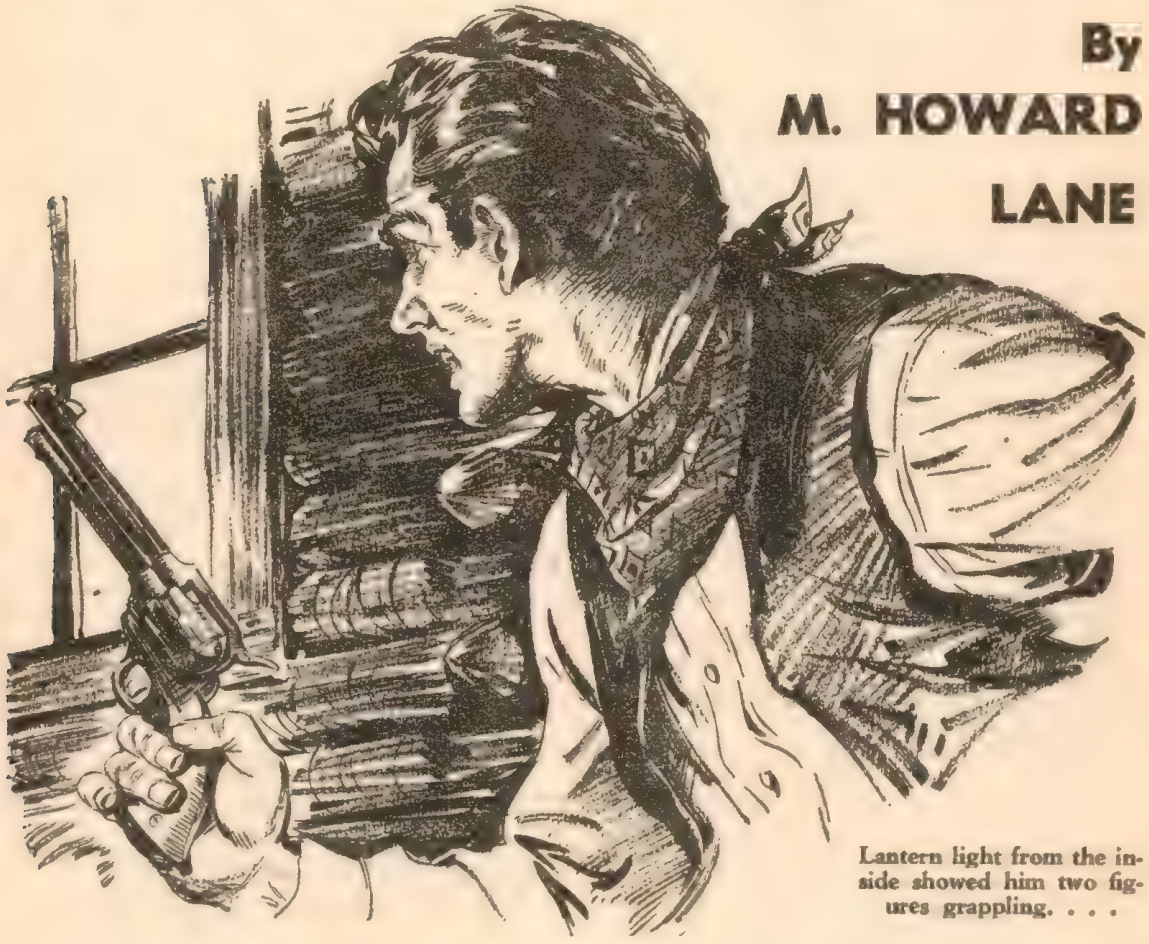
CHAPTER ONE

Boothill Claim

JAY CUMMINGS was just one of the many of the gold-seekers rowed ashore from the Pacific steamer, *Belle of Paradise,* and his first view of San Francisco was not prepossesing. The bay front was littered with supplies the owners could not transport to the City on the Seven Hills, because the dray-men either wanted outrageous prices or were gone to the gold fields themselves. Russian Hill, and Telegraph Hill were a cluster of tents with sagebrush in between, and only the clean Pacific winds kept pestilence away from this city by the Golden Gate. The streets were paved with cast-iron stoves and sacks

MAN'S GOLD

By M. HOWARD LANE



Lantern light from the inside showed him two figures grappling. . . .

Not until he died did Long-Tom divulge his secret to that gold-panning country — he'd found a new kind of gold, the kind you dig for —like a grave!

of Chilean flour, and woe to the man who dislodged a stove-lid and stepped into the hole beneath.

The only tall part of the city was about Portsmouth Square where scarce lumber had been built into a few hotels and stores and saloons. No, San Francisco was not a particularly pleasant sight in this year of 1852, but it looked better than the jungles of Panama to Jay, and he mentioned the fact to Susan Waite, sitting primly on the thwart of the ship's longboat beside him.

"This is some different than the Chagres and Panama," he said with the enthusiasm of a man of twenty-two who was not too long from his native Vermont.

"I'll give you my opinion," said the girl, "after I see this Portsmouth Square I've heard so much about. They tell me it's an evil place."

Jay grinned. "We have to get used to much here in California. A man sacrifices a lot for gold!" The thought struck them both that there was something prophetic in his words, and Jay knew the girl was thinking of Panama City and the death-bed revelations of a man called Long-Tom Parker.

"Will we have to sacrifice so much, Jay?" Susan asked softly.

Jay lifted his shoulders. "We'll see," he murmured. "We'll see." But he knew that whatever the sacrifice the girl would be strong

enough to make it. She was tall and slender as a red willow tree. And like that tree, he thought, she might bend, but never break. The rigors of the Panama passage had not daunted her, nor had the long wait in Panama City where men had rioted because ships didn't come to carry them to California.

Then the *Belle's* cannon had boomed notice of her arrival, and Argonauts had crowded aboard until there was standing room only. Susan Waite had slept in a blanket rolled on the deck, and she hadn't complained. Her chin was square and she had the air about her of knowing what she wanted—

In her own way, Susan was studying this man beside her. He was young, and yet not young in a land where men were considered grown from sixteen on. Nor was he handsome by the average girl's standard. His brown hair was too thick and bushy, which accentuated the leanness of his face. He was serious-looking, and he was too tall for the weight his bones carried. But with all that she thought him a nice man, with a friendly smile for most people, and fists that looked big and knobby enough to defend himself in any fracas.

A fight was starting now as they stepped ashore, for one of the passengers had ordered a roustabout to carry his trunk up to Portsmouth Square.

"For a dollar?" said the roustabout disdainfully. "Why, mister, you're a piker! Gents pay ten to have me carry their gear to the Square!"

"You're hired," Jay drawled, and he grinned at the longboat passenger, a New Yorker he knew as Uke Fogg.

The man was broad, heavy-set, with curly black hair that came down in a low V on his forehead. His muddy-colored eyes were deep-set beneath heavy brows.

"You've been asking for trouble ever since we reached the Carribbean, Cummings," he said through strong white teeth, "and this time you're going to get it!"

He made a short, lumbering run, and Jay sidestepped. He stuck out one long leg. The New Yorker spread-eagled through the air and plowed sand with his beaked nose. He rose, spitting curses.

Jay hit him. He was angry, but his face showed none of his emotion. He looked as composed as a parson in his pulpit, only his brown eyes seeming to turn hazel as he watched the force of his blow send Fogg staggering back into the surf where a wave spanked him behind the knees and doubled him backward into the shallow water.

The whiskered roustabout shouted and slapped his thigh. He eyed the pile of luggage sailors had lifted from the longboat. "Pick yours out, sir," he invited, "and it won't cost ye a red cent to see 'er laid in the Square. 'Twas a rare sight to watch you lay that Yankee in the briny."

Jay had one eye on Uke Fogg as he pulled Susan Waite's small trunk from the heap. "Take this one," he said. "I'll carry my own."

He shouldered a bulging carpet-bag that carried most of his worldly possessions, including a matched pair of Samuel Colt's new revolving pistols. In California, he'd been given to understand, a man was not properly dressed without at least one gun on his hip, and two was considered better.

Fogg had come dripping from the water and his eyes studiously avoided Jay Cummings as he shouldered his own trunk and stumbled off into the sand-hills trail that led up to Portsmouth Square.

Jay watched the man go, and he knew that he had made his first enemy in California—a dangerous one at that, for Uke Fogg had shown himself a man who knew when he was at a disadvantage—a man willing to bide his time.

"WILL he be going to Yanktown?" Susan Waite's voice sounded strangely small.

Jay shrugged, but he was honest with the girl because it was his nature to be aboveboard with everyone "I hope not," he told her. "I want no trouble with him."

Her uncle, Seth Waite, was small and middle-aged, with magnificent pepper-and-salt burnsides. He joined them, and his bright, bird-like eyes were admiring as he clapped the younger man on the shoulder.

"If you handle every situation as well as this one," he prophesied, "we'll be on top of the heap in no time."

Jay looked down at Seth, and he felt the older of the two. "Fogg," he said, "is not the kind to take risks if he can hire somebody else to do his dirty work."

The proof of that statement came during the evening. Touring the already garish saloons, where every gambling table was busy, and every wheel spun to a fortune a turn, he felt the breath of a knife whirr across his shoulder as he passed the dark mouth of an alley between the Golden Lily and the Paramount Palace.

Feet thumped in the passageway as Jay turned that way. His hand dropped to one of the new Colts gracing his hips; then he let his fingers slowly slide from the weapon. Shooting into the dark alley would gain him nothing, for the sound of the shots would bring Argonauts running and call for unnecessary explanations. No, he could take that thrown knife as a warning, and be thankful that it had missed. He and the Waite's had counted on spending a few days in San Fran-

cisco, buying supplies and seeing the sights of this rag-tag metropolis, but the knife was stronger than words to advise him that the quicker they left this city the better. Slowly he turned back to the Rocklin House where they had been fortunate enough to secure rooms.

The next morning he paid the Embarcadero a visit. The bay shore was a forest of leaning spars and tilted masts, for there were scores of ships rotting here in the roadstead for lack of crews to sail them. Later he returned to the hotel. The Waite's were watching for him, and though he'd told them nothing about his escape the night before, Susan's anxious gray eyes seemed to say that she could guess at what had happened.

"Captain Sutter's launch, the twenty-ton *Amelia,* sails at dawn tomorrow morning," he told them. "I've bought deck passage for us, and with luck we can be in Sacramento the following day—and Yanktown within the week."

"Ho, for the gold-fields!" sang Seth Waite, and it was easy for Jay to see that he had already been downstairs, "smiling at the bar."

"You wanted to buy mining equipment here," Susan reminded him.

Jay shrugged. "We can pick up what we need in Sacramento," he said briefly, "and horses too. Long-Tom Parker told us in Panama that Yanktown is a good sixty miles up the American from Sacramento."

"I remember," the girl said softly, and Jay knew her thoughts were turning back to that white city beside the bay of Panama that had looked so beautiful, and yet was stalked by the twin killers, cholera and yellow fever. Gold-seekers had died there by the score, died and lain unburied for lack of coffins! One of them had been Long-Tom Parker, returning from California. Susan Waite and Jay had taken the miner into their own tent on the hill above the bay, but the fever had gained too great hold for them to stem its onslaught.

And looking at them out of feverish eyes, Long-Tom Parker had told them of Yanktown. *"As pretty a spot as a man ever saw,"* he'd said. *"White water, with gold in the sands. Pines that look like they're pokin' holes in the sky. 'Tis a place for young men, not old fogies like me. I made my pile there and then blew it like the old fool I am. Save what ye pan, son, and I'll tell ye why."* His voice had dropped to a husky whisper. *"Yeah, I'll tell ye, because you folks have been danged good to an old man. Go to Yanktown, and there'll be some as will show ye Long-Tom Parker's old claim. Won't nobody have jumped it, because I passed the word around that she'd petered out—which is the truth. But this is what there ain't none of 'em know. Back in the pines behind my claim, I kicked a hunk of rotten rock off a ledge when I was lookin' for me a deer to kill. And that rock was white, son, white and purty as a virgin's soul, and it was streaked with gold as pure as any honey. I broke it up that night in a kettle, and got me better'n an ounce of free gold out of that one chunk of rock!*

"Son, there ain't anybody ever stopped to worry about where the gold they're washin' out of the rivers comes from. But I'll tell you it comes from the hills, from ledges of quartz like the one I found. I kept the news to myself, and haided for Sacramento with my savings to see if I could buy any equipment for stampin' quartz, but I got shanghaied into a Front Street deadfall, and got myself all likkered up. Stayed drunk for a week and spent seven thousand dollars. When I got sober enough to think, I figgered the thing to do was head back to Boston where I could git enough people interested to stake me to heavy minin' equipment. But I know now that I ain't ever goin' to see Boston again, so that's why I'm tellin' you what I found. Stake my claim—Stake my claim!"

A CARRIAGE took them and their luggage down to the rickety pier where Captain Sutter's launch bobbed on the wavelets of the bay. A score of other gold-seekers were already aboard, but Jay saw no sign of Uke Fogg as they stepped to the deck, and then the New Yorker came from the cabin. His white teeth shone as he smiled at them, but there was something malignant in his muddy eyes as he moved to the foredeck of the *Amelia.*

The ropes were cast off and the launch moved into the bay just as the sun leaped into view over the green hills across the water. The Kanaka cook came from the galley to hand them steaming cups of coffee, and Jay put his arm around Susan's waist to steady her against the bouncing roll of the launch. It was the first time he had dared hold her close to him, and her pliant body moved in unison with his own.

"Uncle Seth," she murmured, "might not approve of this, but I believe he is below decks with a trapper from Oregon—some gentleman named Big-foot Malarkey, and I fear they are drinking. Uncle Seth makes friends with the strangest people!"

"A touch of what they'll be having wouldn't taste bad in our coffee," Jay retorted, and he took the girl's cup.

He smiled at her as he moved toward the cabin, but his thin face quickly sobered when she couldn't see his expression. Any friends they could make, he thought, might prove valuable in the days that lay ahead of them. The magnitude of the discovery Long-Tom Parker had made was hard to conceive. The

Sacramento and the Sierras was placer country. There was gold in every creek along the Mother Lode, and while it was plentiful men would never worry about its source. That it might have been washed down from quartz ledges through countless centuries was something far from the average gold-seekers imaginings.

The discoverer of such a claim might revolutionize mining in the Sierras. And yet one hint of what they had come to search for would send thousands of men into the hills. Their plans were something they must not speak about even amongst themselves, Jay thought, and he knew that he'd best warn Seth, who had a tongue that rattled on and on like a pair of Mexican castanets.

On the other hand there might be nothing to this quest of theirs. Long-Tom Parker had been ill with yellow fever when he'd told them of his discovery, and his imagination might have only pictured that fabulous quartz ledge. Perhaps the gold-clotted rock had been nothing more than a fever dream. Jay was too hard-headed to let his hopes rise. He would believe Long-Tom's story when he saw the quartz ledge.

A voice struck his ears above the whining of the breeze through the stays as he stepped into the companionway that led to the cabin. Peering across a coil of rope, he saw Uke Fogg's black-garbed shape standing forward with a small, thin man, who was garbed also in black.

"Spade," Fogg was saying. "I tell you Yanktown's the place to head for. I overheard that much through the walls of the Waite's tent in Panama. They had an old buzzard with them that was dying of fever, and he was telling them to go to Yanktown. If we can get rid of Cummings in Sacramento the old man and his niece will still aim for the mountains. Keeping an eye on them might be more profitable than spending your talents in some Front Street saloon!"

"I'll take the deadfall gold," Jay heard the smaller man remark. "It's in my hand, and yours is in your head—"

Jay stepped on down to the launches small cabin, and his face was bleak. Uke Fogg would follow them to Yanktown—a nemesis dogging their trail. He saw Seth Waite with his newest friend leaning across the bar that crossed the opposite end of the cabin and, despite the dangers that lay ahead of them, Jay had to grin at the contrast between the sparrow-like Seth, and the lanky length of Big-foot Malarkey.

The frontiersman was garbed in buckskin that had absorbed the smoke of many campfires. His brown hair was down to his shoulders, shot with gray, and the moccasins that covered his feet were the biggest things Jay had ever seen. They looked like flapjacks dried in the sun.

Jay set his coffee mugs in front of Seth. "I'll take a drop of the same in each of these," he said. "It's cold on deck."

Seth's eyes were bird-bright as he looked at the Vermont man. "Son," he said, "ye got to meet Big-foot. Malarkey, shake hands with Jay Cummings. We're a-goin' to Yank—"

Jay clapped one big hand over Seth Waite's mouth, but the hand was not half so large as the one extended to him.

Malarkey's eyes were a merry blue in a face roughened by many crossings of the Sierras. "I was one of Cap Fremont's California Battalion," he proclaimed, and there ain't an inch of this State I ain't seen. Seth hyar is the fust man that can drink for drink with me, and I ain't a-goin' to desert him. He tells me you-all are goin' to Yanktown to hunt that pesky gold, and I'm a-goin' with ye. Oregon can wait. That thar territory won't miss me, but you will, with a woman along with ye. Them she-male critters git tired of beans and sowbelly and I'm jest the gent who can bring down a buck when we need one. So you've hired yourselves a hunter, and I'll take my pay in the gold ye find—long as you pervide a jug once in a while."

Jay returned to the deck, and he was remembering the Bowie knife and revolver at Big-foot's thigh, and the long rifle leaning against the bar at his elbow. It was possible that Seth Waite might have his good points after all. They were going to need friends in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Ledge

IT was mid-morning of the third day before the launch swung into Captain Sutter's Embarcadero on the Sacramento riverfront. Once this man whom the Spanish had dubbed the protector of the northern frontier had owned all he could see from the watchtower above his fort, but now his empire was crumbling. The call of gold had brought thousands to California, and much of it was being found on Sutter's land. There were bales and boxes of goods strewn about the waterfront bearing the address of Sutter's Fort. This was Sacramento where a man bought a town lot for two hundred dollars and sold it for four hundred before the end of the day.

They found rooms in the Palmer House, and Sue Waite's face was radiant as she strolled the streets of this growing city with Jay.

"You can feel the excitement in the air," she half whispered. "Gold! Gold in the rivers and gold at the grassroots. This is what we

came West for, Jay. This is really living!"

He could not share her enthusiasm. There were too many hazards ahead. He wondered fleetingly if she might consent to stay here in Sacramento while the rest of them went to Yanktown but he knew the girl wouldn't consider it. And in his heart Jay also knew that he didn't want to leave her behind. He wanted her with him—always.

Big-foot Malarkey had promised to find horses for them. Seth Waite was buying their supplies and camp gear. Jay left Susan at the hotel, and had a boatman row him across the river to Captain Sutter's fort. It was his job to purchase the mining equipment they would need.

The stores inside the walls of the fort were filled with eager men ready to head for the gold fields. Jay saw Uke Fogg leaning against a far counter. The New Yorker seemed more intent on listening to the flow of conversation about the room than in buying supplies. Jay went about the task at hand and it was dusk by the time he finished purchasing the equipment they'd need. Axes and saws and picks and short shovels. Shallow gold pans, and a pair of Indian pestles they might need to grind gold from the honey-clotted quartz Long-Tom Parker had told them about. Jay kept his mind from thoughts of that ledge. The possibilities of it were almost too fantastic to consider.

He heard a pair of men back from the mines talking, and caught the mention of Yanktown. "If somebody ain't jumped our claims before we get back we'll be lucky," one of them complained. "I tell you they just wait for yuh to ride to town, then step in and say you abandoned your claim because you ain't settin' on it. Something's got to be done about the mi[illegible] laws or we'll all be run out. If them cl[illegible]umpers ever get organized under one boss, the rest of us fellers might just as well quit."

His companion grunted, "There's enough gold for everybody—"

Behind the pair, Jay saw Uke Fogg and the New Yorker had his ear cocked. He, too, had overheard that scrap of conversation.

Jay arranged to have his purchases delivered to the Palmer House, almost automatically, for his thoughts were on the talk he'd overheard. Long-Tom Parker had also mentioned claim-jumpers. He wondered if Long-Tom's claim would be as he'd left it.

We'd better get to Yanktown poco pronto! he thought as he walked back to the landing.

The boatman who had ferried him across the river was not in sight, but three bearded Argonauts were just piling into another skiff. One of them beckoned through the early dusk.

"Hop in," the man invited. "There's always room for one more."

Jay accepted the invitation, and clambered aboard. The passengers in the skiff were all black-bearded, bushy-haired men. They looked like brothers. Their smiles were almost identical as the boatman pushed them into the stream and took up his oars.

An expert twist of his wrist pointed the prow of the skiff upstream as they gained the middle of the river, and Jay felt the muzzle of a Colt poke hard against his kidneys.

"Don't do no yellin'," a voice admonished, "or you'll be feeding the fishes!"

Jay saw the pair on the rear thwart grinning at him. Uke Fogg had failed to enlist the aid of the gambler aboard the *Amelia,* but he had found this trio of brothers in Sacramento, Jay realized, and almost without thought he lurched backward and twisted the gun from his ribs. He reached for the gunwale of the skiff and had his fingers on it when he felt hands drag him back.

"No ye don't, me bucko," one of the brothers snarled and Jay saw the man's upraised revolver descending like a club. He shot out his fist, and it crashed through the man's black beard, straightening him and tipping him off balance. The man's revolver scraped his arm; then the other was going overside with a splash that lifted spray into the boat.

Jay felt the arms of another of the brothers reaching for his knees, and he kicked out, realizing they wanted no sound of shots to draw attention to them. It was the one advantage he held. If a gun exploded on the river there were many men ashore who would pause to look.

He smashed a fist into another bearded face, and he saw the boatman trying to draw in an oar to club him as he went overside in a long dive. The coldness of the water hit him, and then he was swimming free toward the Sacramento shore.

"Run him down," he heard one of the brothers cry. "Uke will skin us alive if we let him git away—"

The skiff was a lurching shadow above him. Jay tried to twist away, to dodge, but it was awkward, swimming in his clothes. He knew a moment's despair, and then the prow of the skiff caught him full in the back of the head and he felt himself sinking into the dark-green depths of the river, only now the water was his enemy no longer. It felt like a warm, soft bed on which he could sleep forever.

HE AWOKE in a camp where firelight danced off the yellow bark of tall pines and gray granite boulders, and he heard Uke Fogg's voice say savagely, "If you hit him too hard, Newton, I'll cut out your heart and hand it to the grizzlies—"

"He'll come around all right," Ole Newton

growled. "Them long rangy ones are hard to kill."

Jay held himself quiet, hoping to hear more. This was the second night since they'd left the river, he realized, because there were no pine forests within a day's journey of Sacramento. That meant Susan, and Seth Waite, and Big-foot Malarkey had missed his return to the Palmer House. The supplies he'd ordered had reached them yesterday morning, so they would know that his disappearance had come after leaving Sutter's Fort, and they'd be searching for him. But would they guess that Uke Fogg was behind his disappearance—that he was already on the road to Yanktown?

The hoofs of a horseman turned his train of thoughts. He heard the rider enter camp. "They're on the trail, Uke," he heard the rider report. "Comin' to Yanktown, even without their rooster. I rode with the two of 'em long enough to git their story, and they ain't quittin'. Howsomever, they're mighty close-mouthed about what they aim to do once they git to Yanktown."

"We will learn that in good time."

"What about the rooster?" the rider asked.

"Cummings?" Fogg said coolly. "We will take good care of him. Very good care. He will make an excellent bargaining point when the time comes. His release for the Waite's secret. I think the girl is in love with him, and if she is he will mean more to her than gold. But this is just one string to my bow. Yanktown is ripe for the plucking—"

Jay lay to one side of the fire, and the camp spun as he opened his eyes to get a view of the rider who had brought the news that the Waite's were on the Yanktown trail. He wondered why the man hadn't mentioned Big-foot Malarkey. Had the frontiersman deserted the Waites? Or was he questing about like a hunting dog, seeking their lost partner? Time would give him the only answers to that, he thought grimly, and tugged surreptitiously at his bonds. He could tell by the feel of the thongs that they were soft leather. Buckskin perhaps, and if buckskin was wet it would stretch—

He decided it was time to let them know he was awake. "You gents going to let me starve?" he asked, and was surprised at the weakness of his own voice. Going without food had sapped his strength. He wondered if he'd have the stamina to get away even if he got the chance.

Uke Fogg leaped from beside the fire and came to peer down at Jay. His mud-colored eyes looked like black holes punched in the dark skin of his face.

"Cummings," he said softly, "I never forget an insult. You'll pay for that beating I took in 'Frisco, pay and die before I'm though with you!"

They fed him cold beans and greasy salt pork and even that tasted good to Jay. One of the black-bearded brothers brought a dipper of water to wash down the food.

Jay held up his bound hands. "I can hold it," he grunted.

He drank from the dipper slowly, and let water dribble off his chin and down along his wrists. He could feel the leather soaking it up, until the other jerked the dipper away from him.

Jay smiled in the gathering darkness as the fire died to a bed of glowing coals. Fogg, and all but the guard who had served him rolled up in their blankets. Carefully Jay went to work on the thongs, stretching, twisting, spreading his wrists, and then he felt one hand come free.

The guard at the fire stood up and stretched. His hand came from his pocket filled with more thongs and Jay felt his heart sink.

"If ye think you're puttin' something over on Ole Newton, you're mistook, partner. Now set right still while I tie you up ag'in, or I'll put you to sleep for keeps."

Jay lashed out at the man's stomach with his one free hand as Newton bent forward and then the blackbeard was toppling down over him, knocking him backward to the ground and a huge, silently laughing shadow was standing above them.

"Take more than a bunch of shirt-tail buscaderos to make this gent suck aigs," Big-foot Malarkey whispered. He stooped and pulled Jay from beneath the guard and lifted him.

"Ye couldn't walk if I cut ye loose," he whispered, "but we'll fix those legs in my camp."

Thirty minutes later Jay could stand on his feet. Needles of pain lifted to his thighs and twisted the smile on his lips. "This'll be somethin' to tell about—if I ever have any grandkids—"

"Ye won't live to rear any if we don't git out of here," Malarkey said from where he was saddling a pair of horses. "Fogg and them Newtons are goin' to be powerful mad when they find out you ain't visitin' 'em anymore—how come they missed slittin' your throat?"

"They were going to trade me for Long-Tom Parker's secret," Jay said grimly. "But there's more than that to it. Fogg overheard some talk in Sutter's Fort about claim-jumping. I think he's coming to Yanktown to organize the claim-jumpers. If he succeeds, might be no man will be able to call his claim his own!"

They rode that night and reached Yanktown the next morning as the sun burst above the Sierra peaks back of the mining town. A cluster of raw board shacks and tent-roofed shanties and cabins, the town had been built on a shelf above the roaring American. The

river canyon was still full of dawn-mist, but already Jay could see men, appearing little larger than ants, working their claims along the river.

The vastness, the grandeur of this setting was enough to bring a lump into any man's throat, Jay thought. For sheer, savage beauty, nothing could equal the majesty of this Sierra country where men fought and died for gold, where they stood in icy water all day long to wash enough dust to squander in the saloons and honkytonks that surrounded the square. It was easy to see why many of them returned to Panama, bitter and disheartened—why the weak ones turned to claim-jumping and robbery.

Jay's thoughts were broken by a whoop from Malarkey. "Hale Bascom," he yelled. "Bascom. Why, you old horntoad! Since when did you start wearing a star?"

Jay looked up to see a tall rider with a gold star on his loose vest approaching them. The man was lean, gray, hard-looking, but the lines of worry about his light blue eyes and tense mouth were predominant. He smiled tiredly at Malarkey and put out his hand.

"Big-foot," he said, in a tone dry as the rustle of pine needles over bare ground, "you're a sight for sore eyes. Before the day's out you'll be wearing a deputy's badge or I'll know the reason why."

"Later mebbe," Malarkey agreed, "but not until some friends of mine git settled. Shake hands with Jay Cummings from Vermont. Some partners of his'n named Waite should be coming along about tomorrow—"

Jay took the Yanktown marshal's hand. "Did you ever know a miner named Long-Tom Parker?" he asked.

"He was my good friend," Bascom nodded. "His claim petered out and he headed for home. I hope he made it."

"He died in Panama City," Jay told the marshal briefly. "In our tent, while we were waiting for a ship to bring us to San Francisco."

"They die coming and going—" Bascom shook his head—"and they die here. I wish I'd stuck to trapping with you, Big-foot, but I didn't. The job of preserving order in this camp is mine."

"Ye take it too serious," Malarkey judged keenly.

The marshal shrugged. "A man can't trust his gold to the stages. Highwaymen hold them up almost every trip. He can't carry it on his person for fear he'll get clipped over the head. So all he can do is spend it. I don't blame them, but the deadfalls are getting rich and so are the claim-jumpers. They wait until a man makes a strike and gets drunk and talks about it, then ride out and steal his claim. Skin the best off the top and then wait for the next one. I've arrested a few, but their friends bail them out fast as I can throw them in jail."

Jay thought of Uke Fogg. "Another one's on his way here right now," he said quietly. "A man with ambition and intelligence—he's talking organization and acts like an old hand at it. His name is Uke Fogg. Watch out for him. But right now our aim is to locate Long-Tom Parker's claim. Whereat can we find it?"

"A half dozen men have worked it since he pulled out," the marshal said. "You're wasting your time on that strip of sand, but the recorder will give you the location. And I'll wish you luck."

Big-foot added, "Keep your eyes peeled for two pilgrims dragging some pack-mules behind 'em. One of said pilgrims is a she-male."

"A woman in this camp!" Bascom exclaimed. "A decent woman? Lord, she'll be the only one. For God's sake take care of her!"

"I'll try and do that," Jay said quietly.

THE recorder found the records of Long-Tom Parker's claim in a tattered log book.

"Six fellers have tried to work that claim since Long-Tom pulled out," he said irascibly. "Dunno why you should tackle it. There ain't no gold left in them sands. Howsomever, the claim's right acrost the river from camp. You cain't miss it. They's a cabin, and what's left of Long-Tom's original rocker. That's how he got his name, inventin' that sluice-box of his'n to wash gold. Plenty of fellers have built 'em since."

Jay grinned at Malarkey as they left the recorder still mumbling.

The honkytonks were going as strong this morning as they had the night before. The street was filled with miners and mules and horses. Men were getting ready to pull out to camps in the higher Sierras. There was excited talk of new strikes and, trying to visualize Uke Fogg in this setting caused Jay to feel a qualm. The man had the qualities of a leader, and there were enough men here who seemed in need of one.

Long-Tom's cabin was a single room built of logs, and it hadn't been used recently. The pack rats had taken possession.

"That Sue Waite will make the dust fly around here," Malarkey grinned. Then his face sobered. "So will Fogg, unless we move fast. Let's get about looking for that ledge Long-Tom found before Uke and them Newtons hit town."

"No." Jay vetoed the plan, but his blood was pulsing with the desire to go into the pines behind Long-Tom's claim and start their search. "The thing to do is start panning the

claim—make Fogg think that's what we came for. He should lose interest in us after he starts trying to organize the claim-jumpers."

"Mebbe," Big-foot Malarkey grunted, and he sounded unconvinced.

The Waites rode across the American the next morning in the company of Marshal Bascom, and Jay and Big-foot were there to greet them.

"Ye bring a jug?" Malarkey asked Seth, and got a bird-like nod.

"Would I be without one?" Waite chuckled.

Jay hardly heard them. He had eyes only for Susan. There was a radiant smile on her lips, and she came naturally into his arms. This was the first time he had held her close to him, and there would never be another moment to equal it. He felt her lips against his own, and all doubt was gone from his mind. She would be his wife if Yanktown favored them—but not before. A penniless man from Vermont could not ask a girl for her love until he had proven himself. The pressure of his own hands broke their embrace.

"You came through," he said huskily.

"So did you," Sue Waite said.

"With Big-foot's help," Jay said grimly.

"And now?" she asked.

"We'll search for Long-Tom's ledge in the evenings," Jay told her grimly, "when men across the American can't spy on us."

Seth Waite and Big-foot came back from a night spent in the deadfalls, and both of them were half-seas over.

"The whisky ain't good, but it's powerful," Seth grinned at them.

They went on their first search the next evening when dusk was filling the river canyon, and excitement took some of the ache out of Jay's legs, for he had spent the day panning in the icy waters of the American.

Behind Long-Tom's cabin, the walls of the canyon rose sharply with outthrusts of granite, and quartz ledges marking the slopes. One of them contained gold, clotted like honey. But which one? It was their job to find out, Jay thought. He also thought of something else as they rested tiredly in the cabin after their search.

"Long-Tom," he told them, "covered what he found so nobody else would stumble on it. Tomorrow night we'll take picks and shovels with us."

The next afternoon Marshal Bascom rode across the river to see them. "The decent miners are calling a meeting tonight in the square," he told them through tight lips, "and I'd like to have you there. Two miners were killed upriver today, and their claims were jumped. We've got to put a stop to it!"

"Fogg?" Jay asked.

The marshal nodded. "You were right. He's working fast. I think he's got a scheme up his sleeve to try and take over the whole of the diggings!"

EVENING came, and Jay said thoughtfully as he watched Big-foot saddle their horses, "Two of us should stay here on the claim."

"Me'n Seth will ride over to the shindig." Malarkey nodded his gray head and licked his lips. "Oughta be red-eye flowin', and it ain't good for younkers like you and Sue. Don't figger you'll have airy trouble here. Everybody will be in the square, spoutin' law and disorder."

"We'll do some searching while you're gone," Jay nodded. "This should be a good night for it."

After Waite and Malarkey pulled out, Jay brought tools from the river. He told the girl with a smile, "Tonight we'll look for the ledge in places where it could have been easily covered."

There was one open clearing behind the cabin, and Jay studied the slant of it in the dusk, his eyes scanning the smooth pine needles that lay like a brown carpet over the ground, and near the rear of the clearing where a bulwark of granite boulders blocked it, he noticed that the pine needle floor seemed to tip up abruptly,

"Come on," he said softly, and the girl scrambled to match his pace across the slippery floor of the clearing. At the hummock Jay sank his pick experimentally into the smooth needles, and he felt the tip of it jar solidly off rock.

"Buried ledge," he said, and he could not keep the excitement out of his voice. "Sue, bring your shovel!"

He scraped a patch clean and he could see that the ledge extended right across the clearing, with the granite no more than a cap above the white quartz that shone palely in the dusk. Jay chipped chunks from the ledge and Sue Waite gathered up her skirt, and let the quartz fall into it."

"I bought pestles and mortars in Sacramento to crush this rock," Jay said tensely. "Let's get back to the cabin and see if I wasted our money—"

Far away, across the river, as they returned to the front of the cabin, Jay could see the red glow of a fire in Yanktown's square and the shapes of men milling about it. Honest miners had left their claims up and down the river to attend that meeting. The thought stopped Jay like a jolting fist.

He felt the girl's hand touch his arm. "Is something wrong?" she whispered.

He answered slowly. "Sue, I don't rightly know. But the idea just hit me that there's a heap of empty claims along the river tonight.

A man can't be in two places at once, and most of the honest ones have gone to hear what Bascom has to say. So what is to keep Fogg and his men from taking over the claims up and down the river?"

The girl's breath came in a gasp. "Why—why, nothing, I guess." She looked at him, wondering. "Can it be done so simply?"

He nodded, a sudden alarm in him, which he kept from his eyes. Then, wordlessly, he led the way into the cabin, and turned up the wick in the lantern on the table as the girl laid her samples on the boards.

Then his worry was forgotten. Both of them stood frozen, speechless. There was no need to use pestle and mortar to crush the quartz. The rock was a glowing white in the lantern-light—and it was clotted and veined with threads of honey!

Jay Cummings looked at the gold, but the sight of it did not stir him as he had anticipated. Instead of elation, that fabulously rich rock brought a feeling akin to fear into him. The consequence of their find would shake California to the core, once they made the discovery known. Men would start tearing the hills apart. Placer mining would be forgotten. New laws would have to be formulated governing lode claims—and over all was the constant black shadow of Uke Fogg and men of his kind.

"God!" Jay whispered, "it's been there all these centuries waiting for some man to come along and find it."

"The right man," Sue said softly. "The man who could hold it—"

Jay turned almost blindly out of the cabin door, snatching up a shovel as he went. He swung up the slope behind the cabin, tearing a limb from a snowbush. It would serve to brush the pine needles back over the cut they'd made.

The irony of their predicament caught at him. Their discovery was the first of its kind in the history of the gold fields and it had to remain hidden because some men coveted the possessions of their neighbors, rather than make the effort to locate claims of their own.

Head bent, Jay scrambled up the slope toward the ledge, and he would not have seen the shadow that launched himself from the cover of the pines had it not been for the thin scream of terror that came up from the cabin.

The sound was like a knife going through him, and Jay straightened and saw the man almost upon him, upraised Colt in his hand. He recognized Ole Newton, and lifted his shovel instinctively as the man dove at him. The sharp tip of it caught Newton in the throat, and Jay heard him utter one strangled cry and his head was canted queerly as he fell.

Blood from Ole Newton's severed jugular poured down along his arm, and stained Jay's hand as he jerked the Colt from the man's limp fingers.

He heard Susan cry out again, and his long legs pushed him back down the slope toward the cabin. Another of the Newtons was trying to capture the girl, he realized, and he was thankful for the gun in his hand. Both the brothers had probably heard too much. If one of them escaped to carry word of their discovery to Uke Fogg, Yanktown would be turned into a death town.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Gold

JAY swerved around a corner of the cabin, and lantern light from inside showed him two figures grappling before the open door. He jumped toward them, not daring to fire for fear of hitting Sue. The black-bearded Newton flung the girl toward him and their bodies collided with a solid impact. Jay tripped and sprawled down on the slippery pine needles and heard a bullet plough the ground beside him. Twisting, he fired and saw the dim shape of Newton seem to bend back and merge with the darkness, and then the man was lumbering away, cursing in a blubbery voice.

Sue's arm caught his as he started to follow the claim-jumper. "Jay," she sobbed, "don't! You've got to get across the river before he does. He saw the quartz. The claim-jumpers will know what we've found now—and you've got to warn the honest miners to get back to their claims—"

Jay halted as he heard the beat of hoofs. Newton had found his horse and was racing downstream. The man would be heading for Uke Fogg to spread the news of the ledge of gold they'd discovered. Sue's counsel was wise—but the consequences would be beyond reckoning, once he spread the wildfire news that there was quartz in the gorge of the American!

"You're riding in with me," he said. "I won't leave you here alone."

"No," Susan shook her head. "Those men won't be back here tonight. I'm not afraid Jay. This is our claim, and I'll do my share to hold it!"

Jay carried a chunk of the gold-veined quartz in his hand as he rode into Yanktown's square. Men were banked on all sides of it. Some were leaning from the open windows of buildings, others were on the roofs, listening to the ringing voice of Marshal Hale Bascom.

Jay was hardly conscious of the marshal's words; his eyes were searching the faces of the men highlighted by the leaping flames of the burning logs in the center of the square. He saw no sign of Uke Fogg or any of his hench-

men, and the hunch he'd had earlier flamed brighter than the fire. Those men were out along the river, taking over the claims of the miners gathered here.

"Cummings," Bascom began as Jay crowded the black alongside the barrel, and then he ceased speaking, keen eyes noting the tenseness of Jay's face.

"Have you seen Fogg, or any of his jumpers?" Jay asked abruptly.

Bascom shook his head. "They wouldn't be wanting to hear me," he said ironically.

"They might—at a distance," Jay answered. "Bascom, the Newtons just raided us, and I've got a hunch the rest of Fogg's crowd are out taking over the claims of the men who came to this meeting tonight."

The marshal stiffened. "Lord," he exclaimed, "I never thought of that! Men—" he lifted his voice in a shout, but Jay stopped him with a shake of his head.

"Let me tell them," he said simply. He turned his mount and flung up his free arm. The quartz glittered in his hand.

"Boys," he said, "I've got something here to show you. It's quartz gold. Ledge gold me and my partners located on old Long-Tom Parker's claim. There's more where this came from. Mebbe you'll find the same formation on your claims, but whether you do or not—get back to them! Uke Fogg and his claim-jumpers are out tonight!"

"Gold!" That cry rose from a half thousand throats. "Ledge gold—" and Jay knew sickeningly that these miners hadn't even heard his words of warning. All they wanted now was the chance to get to searching for some of that honey-clotted quartz.

It was like a stampede. Even the barkeeps in the tawdry deadfalls were whipping off their aprons, and grabbing for picks and shovels. This was what their discovery meant. Jay felt sweat on his forehead. If his hunch concerning Fogg and his men were right, many of these miners would never see the dawn. Death would be waiting for them at their claims.

"Hold up—" he shouted desperately, but nobody was listening.

Big-foot Malarkey had padded up to his side. "The faster ye build a fire the harder she's to put out," he said.

Hale Bascom's thin face looked like a death mask in the firelight. "If your guess is right, Cummings, we can expect trouble before morning. You boys ride back to your claim and get what sleep you can. I may need deputies tomorrow."

"There won't be much sleep for any of us tonight," Jay said somberly. "The Newtons and Fogg know what we've discovered. We've got to be ready for them in case they pay us another visit."

"We'll be ready," Malarkey said meagerly, and tucked his long rifle a little closer under his arm.

THE echoes of shots from up and down the river started coming almost before they reached their claim.

"Fogg's at work," Big-foot said quietly. "Mebbe he'll be too busy to bother us tonight, and mebbe he won't. Seth, you go inside and keep Miss Sue company. Me'n Jay will kinda sashay around out here and watch things."

The battle for Yanktown was on—they learned the details in the morning as a sickly sun gleamed down through lowering storm clouds, for a rider on a lathered horse splashed across the river and halted in front of the cabin.

"You Jay Cummings?" he rasped as the man from Vermont came around a corner of the building.

Jay nodded shortly. His eyes were red-rimmed from sleeplessness, and two days growth of dark stubble marked his face. The man facing him looked even more dead-beat.

"Bascom wants ye, pronto," he said. "Sez to get yourself set to make a ride."

Susan and Malarkey and Seth were standing in the doorway behind Jay. The girl had a flapjack turner in her hand. "I'm getting breakfast," she said. "Won't you join us, Mr.—"

"I'm Callan, ma'am. Tom Callan, and I don't guess there's time to eat griddle cakes. Hell's poppin' across the river, and it's apt to get wuss. That thar Uke Fogg sent our marshal an ultimatum. Claimed he wanted a letter of resignation posted in the square before tonight or he'd burn Yanktown. Said letter would name him marshal."

"And Bascom's answer?" Jay asked.

"Son," Callan said, "he told 'em to go to hell, and sent out a messenger to Governor Pico, askin' for the militia or Sacramento Home Guard. We got to have 'em up here or go under."

"Go on," Jay said tensely, and he was afraid of what the man would say next.

"Well, sir," Callan said reluctantly, "that fust man came back and told us Massacre Pass was blocked with Fogg's jumpers. The second tried it through the trees and got a bullet in his liver. The third coasted down the river on a log, but he came back with a bullet through his shoulder."

"And the marshal wants you to be the fourth to risk your life," Susan said to Jay. "I—"

"None of our lives will be worth much," Jay said quietly, "if somebody doesn't get through. I'll saddle my horse—"

"I kin git through," Malarkey said positively.

Callan shook his head. "Bascom figgers you might be more use right here. No reflection on you, young feller, but the marshal thinks Big-foot is the one to do the fightin' in case the claim-jumpers pay you another visit."

"Jay ain't no slouch when it comes to brawlin'," Big-foot grunted. "He sharpened his teeth on Ole Newton last night, and we buried him this mornin'. I'll back you with my chips, son, and I'll tell ye how to play the hand. I doubt if them jumpers know thar is a hoss trail over the top of Massacre Pass that Tulare Injuns used the time they dropped down on a passel of emmygrants and give the pass its name—"

Jay nodded, remembering now the narrow, granite-walled pass below Yanktown. He had a picture of it in his mind—gray cliffs on either side of the roaring American, with a wagon road clinging to one narrow shelf above the river.

"Ye hit the hoss trail from this end where thar's a rusty-looking boulder," Big-foot was going on. "The bresh looks thick, but it ain't. Push right through it, and you can stay behind boulders and trees clean to the other side. Once across the hump, Fogg's buscaderos will never catch ye. You remember that big rock this way from the pass?"

"I remember," Jay said, and he turned toward their rope corral to saddle his black mount.

Sue Waite followed him to the corral. She caught his arm as he led his mount from the enclosure.

"Jay," she said softly, "come back to me. If you don't—" she pressed her lips together, and he couldn't hear her add, *If you don't, I'll meet you in Sacramento—*

THE rusty rock Big-foot had told him to look for lay just ahead, across the wagon road that led beyond a dip into Massacre Pass. Jay studied it from the trees. He could hear the roar of the American in its deep gorge, and he could see that the sun had squeezed through the storm clouds. A faint wind made music in the high pines, and birds were calling in the undergrowth alongside the road. The peace here seemed unassailable, and yet he knew Uke Fogg's claim-jumpers waited in the narrow pass.

He rode slowly from the trees. The dip in the road hid him from sight of waiting guards in the pass, and he pushed the black through the screen or brush beside the rust-patched boulder, and found signs of an ancient path. In places it was partially overgrown, but he could still keep to it, and he marveled at the ingenuity of the war-like Tulares who had laid it out so that a man could see down into Massacre Pass, and yet at no time be seen himself.

A hundred feet below him now he could make out the shapes of men crouched behind boulders, ready guns at their elbows.

Watching them, he did not look up until the black stopped of its own accord. Two riders were blocking the narrow trail in front of him, and one of them was chuckling in a beard as red as his curly hair.

"Now what do ye suppose," he asked his companion conversationally, "ever give our good marshal the idee that nobody but his own scouts would know this trail was here?"

"And sendin' a boy on a man's errand. Why, this here hombre don't look dry behind the ears—" the other man's voice was equally confident.

So confident, Jay noticed, that both of the riders were still carrying their long rifles across the bows of their saddles. He wasted no breath on words. His booted heels hit the black's flanks, and the surprised horse leaped forward. A shot up here would rouse the men in the pass. The best he could hope for, Jay realized, would be to arrow between this pair, and gain the shelter of the pines on a higher level. It would delay him, might hold him up until night, when every hour could mean the difference between existence or execution for Yanktown.

The pair were clawing at their rifles, swinging them into position, when a shot racketed suddenly up from the gorge. The sound of it tautened the muscles of the pair facing him, slowed their hands momentarily, and in that instant Jay guided the black between them. His mount smashed into the withers of the brown horse on his left, caromed into the bay on the right, and Jay slashed at the face of the redbeard with his Colt, but missed. He heard the ugly whistle of a bullet as he went low over the black's neck, racing for the cover of deeper pines ahead, and then he caught sight of what was happening in the gorge and surprise almost made him draw rein, the shock was so complete.

Down there in the pass Susan Waite was riding in billowing red skirts. . . .

He was moving forward again, lurching in the saddle, his horse stepping at its own volition, when the red-beard cried down from the rim of the trail behind Jay, "You damned fools, look alive and cover the foot of this ol' Injun trail. The marshal's got a man comin' through—"

HE PAUSED for a dangerous moment behind the cover of boulders to watch Sue ride through the pass, and he realized with exultation in his heart that she was going to make it. She had traded on her sex—donning her most flamboyant gown to advertise herself—but Jay was proud of her. In Sacramento she could reach the governor if

he didn't, but would he listen to a woman without credentials?

The marshal's letter begging official aid was inside his shirt. So was a petition signed by the business men of Yanktown. It would take those documents to make Governor Pico call out the home guard and militia to ride to Yanktown.

Redbeard, and his companion, and a dozen others searched for him like dogs harrying a rabbit and, like a rabbit, Jay found a giant yellow pine, the heart of it burned out by lightning. The cavity in its base was large enough to shelter him and his mount, and the brush had grown high about the giant tree to add its own measure of protection.

There were times during the remainder of the day when Uke Fogg's men were so close he could hear them talking, and while they were near he held the Colt he'd taken from Ole Newton in his right hand, and the nose of his mount in his left. Those were the black minutes, but the quiet hours were worse, for then the temptation was strong to try and make a run instead of waiting for darkness.

Jay tried to hold his patience by thinking of Susan, then of Seth Waite and Big-foot, and he wondered if they could hold Long-Tom's claim against Fogg and the crew with him. And he thought, to while away the hours, of how peaceful Vermont had been. But there'd been no fortunes in gold for a man to take and hold in that Eastern state.

Finally, as the shadows started to lengthen, he tightened the black's cinch, and led the animal from inside the tree. He was not a woodsman, but he could tell from the sunset song of the birds that there were no men in the vicinity.

He rode hard that night to overtake Susan, but he did not see her until the dawn sun splashed her red dress with color where she huddled on the wide porch of Governor Pico's mansion.

Her glad cry welcomed him as he reined down in the yard, and she came running to take his hands as he quit the saddle. Her face was streaked with dirt and tears.

"Sue," he said, "you've been crying."

"I've been a fool," the girl said bitterly. "The guard won't even call the governor. He won't listen when I tell him what has happened. I—I made the try to get through because I wasn't sure whether you'd make it or not—and somebody had to come. Now they won't even talk to me!"

"I hope I have better luck," Jay told her grimly, and his dust-streaked face was hard as an image carved from teak. His thumb was hooked close to the Colt in his belt as a sergeant of the governor's guard came from inside the mansion. The man was yawning, and rubbing his eyes sleepily as he ambled down the steps. The sergeant would not be in a good humor, aroused from illicit sleep at this early hour. He had already refused to awaken the governor for Susan.

Then the sleep was startled from him as he dropped his hands and saw the long revolver in Jay's steady grip.

"Begorra, and this ain't—" he began.

"According to protocol," Jay said dryly. "No, don't call the rest of your platoon. They're probably asleep in the cellar. Just take us up to Governor Pico, and we might forget to tell him you've been sleeping on the job."

"I'll—"

Jay's voice crackled with anger. "You'll do what we tell you, sergeant! We didn't ride here from Yanktown to argue. Men are getting killed up there."

"Likely their own fault," the little Irishman grunted, but he turned in front of them and marched to the porch. "Ye know the governor ain't goin' to like this any better than me. He—"

The sergeant's mouth fell open, for the wide door had opened in front of him, and a man Jay instantly recognized stood before them. He could not mistake Don Pico. White hair broached back from his broad forehead. His skin was the hue of weathered parchment and there was a smile on his lips.

He bowed to Susan Waite, and his smile broadened. *"Señorita—"* his quick eye had already taken in the pair of stained horses in the yard—"your gown was not made for riding—and you, *señor?* By your clothes, I would guess you are a man from the mines. You have ridden far, and only trouble would bring you here with the gun in your hand."

Jay had forgotten the revolver. He flushed and shoved it hastily to his waistband.

"I've got some papers here," Jay said, and to him his voice sounded uncouth. "From Marshal Hale Bascom in Yanktown." He pulled the packet from inside his shirt. "Maybe they'll tell you what we're up against better than I can."

"Entrada." The governor stepped back into the hall. "Señor Reilly," he spoke to the sergeant, "go into the kitchen. Tell Maria to prepare the breakfast."

He seated them in a redwood paneled office and pulled a tall chair behind a great black desk. "Señor Bascom, he commented, "is my very good friend. He became the marshal of Yanktown at my personal request—"

Jay was tired. His head and eyes were swimming with the fatigue of more than twenty-four sleepless hours, and it seemed to him the governor's pace was too leisurely. Time pressed at him like a pair of giant hands.

"Hale will be a dead *amigo,"* he blurted, "if we don't send him some aid in a hurry. A man

named Fogg has organized all the outlaws and claim-jumpers along the upper American. They're aiming to burn Yanktown, steal every claim along the river."

The governor wasn't even listening to him. His eyes had already scanned the brief report Bascom had written, and his foot touched a hidden bell that pealed out in the hall.

The red-faced Irish sergeant came running, took rapid-fire orders. . . .

Relief made Jay's muscles loosen. Hard-riding troopers would be on their way to aid Yanktown's defenders before many more hours, and he and Susan would be riding with them. His chair was soft and he felt his eyes pull shut.

THERE was a soft bed beneath him, and Sergeant Reilly's sardonic face watching him from across the big bedroom when he awoke.

"Sure and ye'd have slept the clock right around," he grinned, "if I hadn't come to wake ye. But I thought to meself, the young spalpeen will want to be in at the kill. He can make up his lost sleep when he's old like me."

Jay found himself liking this sergeant. "I'll be ready to go before you can get to the door," he said.

"Don't hurry," O'Reilly grinned. "The troopers left quite some time ago."

"The girl—Susan?"

"She's still asleep as far as I know," the Sergeant answered.

"Then don't disturb her," Jay directed as he pulled on his boots. "Yanktown's going to be no place for a woman the next few days!"

The black was rested and ready to run, but the troopers had been moving fast. Jay could not bridge the gap of hours that separated him from them.

He heard the shots about Yanktown from the maw of Massacre Pass, but there was no red glow over the town to tell of fired buildings, and so he took heart. The defenders had at least kept the town from the torch, and now there were militiamen to catch the attackers from the rear. They had swept the road clean. Massacre Pass was a sample. Jay wondered how Big-foot and Seth had held out at their claim, and then he had no more time for wondering, for a man on a hard-running horse was racing toward him.

Jay recognized Uke Fogg. Black coattails flying, he was bent low over the neck of his mount, escaping the net that had reached for the men he had led.

"Fogg," he called, "hold up, or fill your hand!"

The escaping leader of the claim-jumpers raised his head. They were close together on

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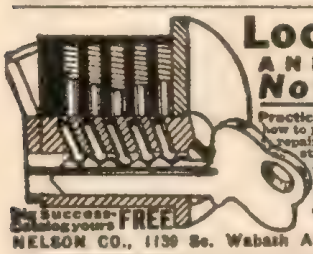
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the lip of the road over the American. White water roared beneath them. Their mounts, Jay realized, were going to collide.

"You asked for this in 'Frisco," Uke Fogg cried, and Jay saw a shiny revolver in the man's hand. He fired Ole Newton's Colt as he felt their horses meet, and the shock lifted them from their saddles and brought them together in mid-air. There was nothing beneath but white water. Jay saw it as they turned over and he felt Uke Fogg's fist graze his cheek, and then the force of gravity tore them apart.

He hit the river and the force of the water was like a board slapping him across the back. He struck and went deep and fought his way to the surface and saw Uke Fogg before him. The man's face was suffused with fury. His hands reached for Jay.

He parried Fogg's grip and felt his hands go about the man's throat, and then they were both under the water as Fogg's legs scissored about him. Jay kept his grip, and he felt his lungs aching for air—then something settled down about his shoulders, and his body jerked free of the clinging current.

Through the roaring in his head, he heard a voice cry, "Come outa there! Ye ain't a fish, damn it. That Fogg ain't one either, so he'll drown and save the price of buryin' him. But ye got more to worry about. A gold mine and a girl—"

Big-foot Malarkey was the man with the rope, Jay saw through the water dripping across his eyes, and he guessed that was Seth Waite and Susan on either side of him. Sight of the girl was hard to believe. Reilly in Sacramento had claimed she was sleeping.

"I told them to tell you that at the governor's," Susan smiled, "but your eyes were too heavy. Besides, I was in the best of company, with five hundred gentlemen to escort me."

Big-foot Malarkey nodded and grinned. "I seen Uke Fogg pull his sneak when you was comin' up the trail—an' kinda headed him for ye. Figgered Yanktown's boy should finish what he started."

"You held our claim?" Jay asked, and he was trying to cough up the water he'd swallowed.

Seth Waite chuckled. "That was easy. When Fogg's men come close enough they saw a jug settin' on the front steps, and couldn't resist it. We marched the hull bunch of 'em over to Marshal Bascom's jail."

Jay felt Susan's hand guiding him to a boulder alongside the road, and her touch drove the chill from his body. "I hope you'll always be this close to me," he murmured.

Her reply was equally soft. "Always, Jay. Always."

OLD-TIMER

(Continued from page 81)

Sam Timmor lifted water-filled eyes above the root. He saw a horseman rounding the far bend and ride into the gorge. The rider was coming quite swiftly, considering the ruggedness of the trail. He was trying to make the ranch before the cold rain broke over the foothills and caught him in the open, and Sam Timmor began to tremble as the man approached the hidden wire.

Then Sam Timmor froze. The figure approaching was not that of a man! It was the slight form of a girl. It was Mary Alice!

He saw another rider round the bar bend and he knew Mary Alice had been in Thunderville that night and this morning she and Tom Watson's boy were coming to the Double O. And she was riding in the lead!

Sam Timmor clawed to his feet. He waved his ragged arms. His blue, cold-pinched lips opened and he shouted hoarsely, "Go back! Don't come forward. *Go back!*" He shrieked it but the wind shrieked its own answer and flung the words back into his wrinkled face.

Sam Timmor cried again, wordlessly this time and a sob came into his throat. He turned and scrambled down the slope, loosening rock and sand as he rolled, but even that didn't attract the attention of the two approaching.

At the foot of the bank, he picked himself up. He couldn't see up the gorge now, but he knew the girl was around that bend, coming swiftly. Sam Timmor began running forward.

The trail was an upward slant and his bowed legs set loose stones under which his rounded heels slipped and he fell. He got up and ran again. The wind blew off his ragged hat and flung it into the brush. Sam Timmor didn't notice. He ran forward with his brown thin hair streaming into his face and he wanted to stop and shout a warning, but he didn't dare to stop. She would be coming around that bend any moment now and he had to stop her.

He lunged forward. "Mary Alice! Mary Al—"

A rumbling sound came from above. He looked up from his hands and knees where he'd fallen and he saw it all in one clear-cut moment—rock, sand, pine-logs—then something hit him.

He heard someone digging, frantically, with bare hands. In the darkness he waited. Someone lifted stones and loose shale off his head and shoulders and in the grey light he saw Mary Alice's brown, sweet face above him. The face was wet but it wasn't raining yet. Sam Timmor didn't glance at the boy. He followed Mary Alice's eyes downward to his body where there was no feeling, only dull shock, and he lifted his eyes quickly.

The mass of rock had caught him squarely,

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from chest down. He was mildly surprised at the lack of pain, only a dull burning pressure high in his chest. It made breathing hard. He moved his withered hands out on the trail and attempted to lift his head.

Mary Alice's soft hand was on his cheek. She bent low. "Don't move."

He stopped struggling.

The wind sounded cold and raw down the gorge. Rain would come pelting down any moment. He thought of those things as the pressure grew in his chest and he thought of a great many more things and he closed his eyes hard.

Mary Alice was bending over him again. A tear fell on his cheek. "Old-timer," she said softly. "You are going to die. Is there—can I do something for you?"

He looked up. Strange, the yellow curtains were gone from before his eyes. He looked at the girl who was crying for him and he wanted to smile. He said, "Die?" And then he looked at the boy for the first time. "A—pencil—and paper?" It was increasingly hard to breathe now; the pressure was tight against his throat.

In wonder the young man took from his saddle bags a paper from a sheaf of them. Sam Timmor saw the letterhead said, TOM WATSON, BUYER OF CATTLE, but he closed his eyes to that.

Mary Alice was on her knees before him. "Yes—old-timer?" She waited, pencil poised.

He tried to speak but words wouldn't come. The throbbing had crept into his neck, his head. He fought for expression.

"I—Sam Timmor—give my—four square sections—in Cut Bank—to—"

The world was blackening. The weight on his legs and chest was suddenly incredibly heavy. The pain was wild within him and he felt his heart pound against it. He clenched rocks in his withered hands.

"—to Mary—Alice—Armstrong."

He reached for the pencil, tried to sign but the writing ran off into a blurred line. The pencil was falling from his hand. He let it fall. His face went down to the rocks. He could feel their roughness with his cheek. He had piled up those rocks. He had tripped over his own wire in saving the only one who had been kind to him in thirty years. He was not sorry. He lay quiet while things grew black and he felt the rain come.

Dimly he heard the girl crying above him, then the man's voice, in wonder.

"Four square sections? Isn't he—wasn't he crazy?"

"No. He was just poor and old and lonely."

Sam Timmor heard and smiled in his sleep. Peacefully, at last.

(Continued from page 87)

Of the scene, yet apart from it, Jim Redstone and Ollie Bascom paid their respects in silent gravity and when it was over and done with, Redstone saw Joyce McCrae move away on a senior officer's arm, fair head bowed and silent.

Through the hot, still, early dark, Redstone prowled the parade, ridden by old memories and angry with himself because he knew the uselessness of them. For he knew that when the Army raised its own, it kept its own. It would be easier, he realized, if he did not see her or speak with her again.

Like something materializing out of the star-glow, she was at his side, falling quietly into step with him.

"I saw you passing against a light," she explained. "I've been wanting to talk to you. You'll be starting back in the morning?"

"Yes. For Wickenburg."

"I'm going with you."

"Why with me? Your people will be glad to send you out in greater comfort and with a mounted escort for safety."

She looked up at him. "My people? I have none, now."

"The Army. You are of the Army."

"While father lived, yes. That tie is broken, now. I am going back with you. Or don't you want me?"

Redstone said slowly, "As a rule, miles are just something to grind out, to be endured. Those coming in from Wickenburg were the shortest I ever knew, and the most pleasant. If you go back with me, they will be the same. I will be sorry to see them end."

"Why?" She threw the questioning word so swiftly it almost startled him. Yet Redstone thought out his answer carefully.

"It is something which started way back in the days when you were the colonel's daughter and I was merely Jim Redstone, private in D troop."

"That," she said softly, "was what I wanted to hear. And you haven't changed?"

"Never for one instant."

Her sigh was one of deep content. A slim palm found its way into one of his brawny, sun-blackened hands. The starlight laid a touch of loveliness on her upturned face.

Looking down at her with a great gentleness in his eyes, Jim Redstone said, "It is a hard country and a demanding one, Joyce McCrae."

"Men like you will bend it to your will and make it a good country," she said with steady faith. "My father gave his life to it. Surely I can give my future. If you wish it, Jim."

The strong, steadfast pressure of his hand was her answer.

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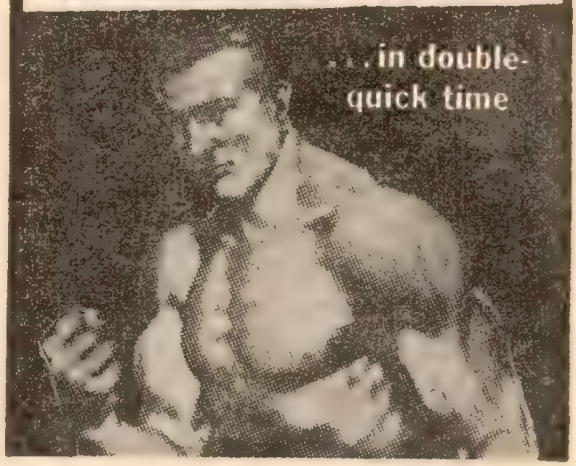

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(Continued from page 95)

across his shoulder. "I'll be back for it later—I hope."

He was halfway to the doorway before he noticed the slim, dark man slide away from the end of the bar and go hurrying through the batwings.

One of Tom Leto's spies, Mark Fravel thought grimly. *Well, if Leto feels like it, let him come and get it.* He started up the street, going to the sheriff's office.

It was a muffled, wall-trapped explosion, and the blow of the bullet, striking him in the back just below the right shoulderblade knocked Mark Fravel flat on his face in the smothering road dust. His body hit with a soft, spanking sound; and for a moment, while his breath came in gasps, his only movement was a slow, imperceptible motion of his right hand towards his holster.

The pain in his shoulder was a blazing agony, but he got the gun in his fist, and then, working his head around by degrees, he lined his bleak eyes on the alley between Stabile's Livery and the feed shack adjoining it. At that instant, Tom Leto stepped cautiously out, his gun half raised, his big, paunchy body rigid with expectancy.

When he saw the gun steadying in Mark Fravel's hand, his right arm jerked up spasmodically. A shot blared, but it wasn't from the gun of Tom Leto.

Mark Fravel watched, with a vague look of surprise, as the gun fell loosely from the saloon owner's limp fingers. Almost idly, as though to pick it up, Tom Leto bent down, his left hand clutching his belly. Then his head seemed suddenly to become an impossible weight on his shoulders; it dropped forward and he pitched down, his chin skidding grotesquely on the splintery boardwalk.

Mark Fravel started to get up. He heard pounding footsteps, was conscious of a blur of faces around him. Hands were supporting him then, and he took a few feathery steps before his knees gave way and a swift, ballooning darkness rushed up to meet him.

HE SAW the black satchel first, and then, faint and blurred, the heavy-jowled jaw. There were eyes like shiny brown buttons sewn into the jaw, and they were staring down at him studyingly.

A voice said, "I think he's coming out of it, doc. Better give him one more slug, to make sure."

The glass was coming up to his lips, then, and he grasped it and drank; the scorching whiskey hit his stomach like liquid fire, and he sat up suddenly.

He had been lying on some kind of a padded

leather table, but now he was able to grin weakly at the man with the jowls.

"That's powerful medicine, doc."

"Humph! It came damn' near not being powerful enough. That bullet was close to your lung, mister."

A tall, wind-burned man standing beside the table said, "This is Doc Steinsic. I'm Sheriff Parks."

Mark Fravel grinned feebly. "I was about to drop in on you, sheriff. Then something dropped on me."

Johnny Parks grunted. "Well, don't lose any sleep over it. Hell, if I'd had the brains of a locoed jackass, I'd have known Tom Leto was lying when he claimed you pulled that gun on him in his office." His hard-bitten mouth tightened grimly. "He won't lie no more—except in boothill."

Mark Fravel said in a slow, wondering voice, You—you mean I'm free?"

"Hell, yes! That bullet went in your *back*, friend. Tom Leto wasn't taking no chances."

Doc Steinsic said, "Just don't try to do any ridin' for a couple days. We got the lead out, but you'll have to take things easy for a week or two."

Out on the street, the fading sunlight was laying brilliant streaks of crimson on the boardwalk. The hitch-rack in front of the doctor's office threw a curious shadow, almost like an arrow pointing. Mark Fravel inhaled deeply. The arrow pointed north—towards the Bent Bow country.

He saw the sign—BON TON STORE—EVERYTHING IN DRY GOODS—and headed towards it, walking tenderly to favor his throbbing shoulder. He entered the store, and a fat old lady bounced up from a chair behind the counter and eyed him briskly.

"Yes?" she smiled.

A sudden confusion overwhelmed Mark Fravel.

"I—I want to buy a doll," he said.

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(Continued from page 107)

Whit made no reply, and Mart turned and eyed Ed Grimes, saying, "Sounded like a threat to me, Ed."

"Sure did," Ed said.

Grimes reached down lazily and his hand came up holding a forty-five.

When his foreman was set, the gun steadied by his arm resting across his pommel, Mart Sanders said, "No one threatens me without something to back it up, Whit." His right arm struck out and he belted Whit across the face with an open palm.

The blow surprised Steve as much as it did the others. As Whit staggered back, clamping a hand to his already bleeding mouth, Steve said quietly, "Hold it, Sanders!"

Mart swung around on him. "Why should I? You heard him threaten me."

John Rice had witnessed all this with a cold rage building up in him. Seeing the blood run down Whit's chin drove the last ounce of caution out of him and now he began cursing Sanders, profanely and viciously.

Mart Sanders listened a moment; a gleam of satisfaction came to his eyes. Then, just as suddenly as he had struck Whit, he reached out and took a hold on John Rice's coat. Then he hit him full in the face, rocking the rancher's head around with one blow, tilting it back again with another. As he did this he smiled, no anger showing on his square face.

"Stay set, you two!" Grimes called to Steve and Joe White.

Mart Sanders shoved Rice away from him and the rancher stumbled into an awning post and fell to one knee. There was a moment when it looked like Joe White was going to lunge in at Sanders. But then Joe stepped back. Ed Grimes, seeing that, eased forward and leaned against the horn of the saddle, arms folded and the Colt's hanging loosely in his hand.

Steve hadn't moved. Now he said, "Mart, I wasn't sure about you. Now I am."

"Sure about what?"

"About how bad you need a lickin'."

"Know anyone who can give me one?"

Steve's glance went to Ed Grimes, whose face took on a down-lipped smile. Grimes still sat as he had a moment ago, lounging in the saddle, his weapon held carelessly.

"Maybe I do," Steve drawled.

As he spoke, his right hand lifted, stabbed in under his coat and came out with the horn-handled .44. The move was so fast that Grimes, halfway understanding it, had only started to stiffen the wrist of his gun-hand. And now he froze, looking into the bore of Steve's Colt's, his own weapon still out of line.

Steve said, "Drop it."

It took Ed Grimes perhaps two seconds to make up his mind. Then the reaction from what he had just seen hit him and his face paled and he opened his fist, letting the gun fall into the dust.

"Joe, go pick it up," Steve said. As soon as Joe was off the walk, he added, "Just see that no one bothers us."

HE TURNED to Mart Sanders, catching only a trace of surprise and apprehension showing from behind the man's closely guarded expression. He stepped over and put the .44 against Sanders' stomach and reached under his coat, lifting the .38 from the shoulder holster.

He backed away and idly tossed it and his own weapon out toward the edge of the plank walk. Then, swinging lazily around on Sanders once more, he hit him full in the face.

All the weight of his heavy shoulders and swinging body was behind the blow. Mart had started lifting his hands, but that made no difference whatever. When his hands did come up they lifted all the way to his aching jaw, trying to press the pain away. An instant later Steve's second blow landed, breaking two fingers of Sanders' left hand and rocking his head far back.

Mart Sanders groaned and doubled over in pain, holding his broken hand with his good one across his stomach. Steve came in and lifted a knee hard into his face, straightening him. Then, viciously, Steve hit him twice more, crushing his lips and breaking his nose with an audible crunching of bone.

Sanders struck out wildly now, and an onlooker let out a whoop of delight that brought men running up along the walk and across from the opposite side. The heavy excitement of seeing a smaller man lick a bigger one swept the quickly-gathering crowd.

A roar echoed along the street as Steve tore his knuckles to the bone on Sanders' teeth

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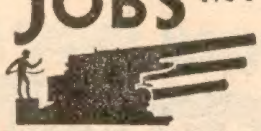

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and his left wrist ached like a molar with an exposed nerve from having hit Sanders at the jaw-hinge. But that blow decided it. Mart Sanders' eyes took on a blank look and afterwards he turned completely away from Steve and swung blindly at the empty air. The blood streaked his battered face and ran from his chin down across his white shirt front.

Blindly he staggered to the walk's edge and Steve let him go. He stumbled off the walk, fell into the hitch-rail and sprawled full length in the street.

The crowd closed on Steve then, whooping and half crazy, a dozen men trying to pound him on the back. Someone yelled, "To hell with the meetin' now!"

They let Steve go finally and he shouldered out of the crowd and saw Norma standing there. Her eyes were bright with that glad smile he so often thought about, and when Whit Ames came up to hand him his gun Steve was halfway sore at the interruption.

He pushed the gun through the belt of his trousers and went across to Norma, soberly telling her, "I should have been easier with him."

"You shouldn't, Steve!" she said. "Now it's settled. It's what he needed."

He nodded. "Like you said last night. Now he'll never get high-handed with you."

A momentary frown touched her face, then was gone. "No, he never will," she said. "He'll never have the chance, Steve."

His face went slack. "You aren't marryin' him, Norma?"

"I am not!"

A strange uneasiness took him and he reached down and dusted off his trousers. They didn't need it, for there wasn't a mark on him or his clothes and his coat wasn't even mussed. When he straightened, he couldn't help smiling. But when he saw the serious set of her face, his also went grave.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You said you'd never use a gun on a man, Steve," she told him. "Not that I minded."

"Did I say that?"

"Didn't you? "

"Think, Norm," he said.

Her look was puzzled. Then, stubbornly, she insisted, "Didn't you say you'd never go against a man with a gun again?"

"What kind of a gun did I say?"

She thought a moment. Then, "You said a loaded one."

He pulled his coat aside and drew the weapon and handed it to her. "That's what I said, Norm. Look it over."

She rocked open the loading gate, and half-cocking the Colt's, spun the cylinder.

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